unmentionables

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table of contents

dedication ................................................................. pg. 3 – 4
introduction ............................................................... pg. 5 – 7
the body in the bedroom landscape ............................... pg. 9 – 21
the materiality of goopiness ......................................... pg. 22 – 39
the fragmented self/other .............................................. pg. 40 – 50
conclusion ................................................................. pg. 51 – 54
acknowledgements ..................................................... pg. 55 – 56
resources ................................................................. pg. 57 – 58
endnotes ................................................................. pg. 59
bibliography .............................................................. pg. 60

Content Warning: sexual assault
dedication
This text and the accompanying body of work are dedicated to all who have emboldened my voice to manifest in any form, no matter how goopy.

To Monika, who uncovered the poetic side of my work, both written and made. To Arny, who encouraged me to let my sculptures to be powerful and command the space. To Richard, who urged me to unapologetically acknowledge the true nature of my work. To Heather, who instantly understood my sculptures and kept me from toning them down for the public. To Liz, who empowered me to fearlessly question just about absolutely everything. To my mother, who raised me to speak up, have empathy and be fierce when needed. To my best friend of eight years Marf, who has grown alongside me, through the pain and with so much love and laughter. To my little sister Kat, who has courage in every ounce of their being and has fought for me since we were toddlers. To my therapist, who always creates a space of compassion when asking me the questions I fear. To my dog Henry, who thinks he is human and alleviates the weight of those answers. To those of you who are grappling with how to find the words, this is also for you.

Thank you all for nurturing me so that I could address what felt so unmentionable.
introduction
unmentionables is my collection of embodied sculptures, scribbled sketchbook notes, and emotive prose that represent healing from sexual trauma while rape culture persists. The silencing associated with rape occurs in both the act and the aftermath. A private violation becomes publicly shamed. While healing is individual, healing can also be collective. It can be contagious. The words and visuals that follow make this sensation material so that it can be addressed. Each component of unmentionables is fragmented, but together they form a whole: the candid truth of a rape survivor. I am the survivor.

In the first part, the body in the bedroom landscape conveys how rape stains the violated spaces of the body and bedroom. To authentically embody the inescapable sensation of living with sexual trauma, my own furniture becomes overgrown by an invasive species of latex skin. This baby pink skin is irritated and infected, a recognizable depiction of the trauma. We do not see many accurate examples of survivors healing from rape. The representation of feminine bodies as objects throughout the canon of art history does not help the empowerment of living feminine bodies. In various stages of healing, my sculptures are uncomfortably intimate with themselves as they tenderly search for self-love. Once in public, they contort in pain as they directly acknowledge their state of fragmentation.

In the second part, the materiality of goopiness confronts the implications of social taboos on the rape survivor. These taboos emerge from the heteropatriarchy and phallocentrism that linger today through misogyny and rape culture. For myself, the implications of the power dynamics of rape are inextricably linked with interpretations of the vulva as monstrous and internal goopiness as grotesque. Abject theory permits us to look under the rug or beneath our skin, to be faced with this shamed goop. Goopiness thus reveals itself as a material that can narrate the shamed survivor’s experience of healing.
In the third part, the fragmented self/other reclaims the survivor’s connection to their self, left fragmented after rape emotionally and physically. During a traumatic event, the body and mind protect the collective self by going into survival mode. The body therefore does not accurately process what is happening, so the fragmented memories and lingering trauma become sensorially locked in the body. My sculptures embody this and confront you to generate body-to-body sensations. They implore you to spend time with them, and as this continues, a realization emerges among you and the sculptures themselves that together, they are whole.

This text is a difficult read, but a cathartic one glittered with humor and compassion. Much of my ability to address any and all of this comes from reading poetry by people healing from sexual trauma. In a poem, survivor Amanda Lovelace directs her reader to “write the story,” and says, “push / your hands / into the dirtiest parts of yourself.” unmentionables is the result of my own digging. To my readers I say, feast your eyes.
the body in the bedroom landscape

how sexual trauma becomes locked in the body and the bedroom: conveyed through sculpture
everyone is always shocked by the event, but no one asks about afterward.

after has been much worse
The landscape of my bedroom holds my body tight and loose within cracks in walls and folds of bedsheets. Rape violates bodily boundaries, breaks them and leaves them blurry. Tangling with the physical confinements and psychological safety nets of my bedroom, I cannot tell where my body ends. My fleshy sculptures embody this tension as they viscerally consume and conform to bedroom objects and furniture. *deflowered* (2021) aggressively snakes around, squishes through and swallows a metal headboard. *folding into myself* (2021) shares legs with a stool, standing awkwardly off-balance and cowering in the corner. *snagged* (2020) splats onto the floor to devour a dirty bra and simultaneously penetrate the wall. *too much, not enough* (2021) saturates a rug with its goopiness and throbs on the floor in pain. My tactile sculptures theatrically and genuinely evoke the bedroom, a presumably safe space left profoundly tainted by rape.

Nightmarish and erotic at once, my combined fragments of artificial bodies and used bedroom furniture express the intimate difficulties of sexual healing. As an artist and survivor myself, it is imperative that my work represents the blunt, honest aftermath of rape in a way that resonates with survivors, instead of re-traumatizing them. Because rape is a sexual, corporeal, emotional violation, I believe the narrative comes from the survivor’s body. Thus, the oppressor is never physically present in my work, only the marks they left. Societal shame pushes these marks deeper into the private spaces of the survivor, their body and bedroom.

Acknowledging the simultaneous softness and potential for violence in the bedroom contextualizes it as a vulnerable space. Bodies are also at their most vulnerable here, especially while sleeping. Humans heal the most while sleeping, and often sleep in beds, but if a human was raped in their bed (once actually while asleep) how do they heal? A new bed? But it is not just that bed, it is the bed, all beds, every single bed. Sheets can be washed but the residue of trauma is embedded in beds and the very act of sleep. Every night, nap, and morning waking up.
Whether we acknowledge or ignore the fact that the crime of rape occurs globally, we tend not to publicly discuss how it is to exist after being raped. A previously uninformed individual could rationalize that healing from rape is difficult, but the act itself is so ugly that discussing the aftermath often feels just as unspeakable. My own hesitation with naming my rapes for what they are has resulted in complicated sculptures that are unstable, insecure and shamed. They sensually embrace their own bodies, vigorously squeeze a headboard, and viscerally permeate the space. They exist in states of agonizing transformation, revealing that they are stuck in trauma while also yearning to move forward.
Rarely do we see authentic representations of an actively healing survivor of rape. NBC’s *Law and Order: SVU* sensationalizes the act for entertainment. This show also makes healing look finite, that rape cases make it to the court room and end there. Ana Mendieta’s *Rape Scene* (1973) depicts the event more accurately, but I can barely look at this work. These graphic scenes only re-tell what happened, instead of how rape impacted an actual living human. I find similarities between the representation of women’s bodies in the canon of art history and the rapist’s treatment of their victim’s body: sexualized and passive. Just bodies. Objects. My sculptures are inanimate objects in space. They are also bodies impaled on headboards. This disrupts how we expect bodies and art to be presented. Their simultaneity embodies the notion of being “too much” or “not enough,” which survivors hear too often.

Siri Hustvedt writes that “emotion and open expression have long been associated with femininity and the corporeal.” I interpret Hustvedt’s statement as a confrontation of the patriarchal social norms that dictate what is shameful or suppressed. The white, pastoral vines in the headboard of *deflowered* are undeniably feminine. This pre-owned headboard lived in my car for many months until I covered it in irritated latex flesh. Overgrown by this artificial viscera, the metal bars become bones and the headboard is transformed into a corporeal entity. *deflowered* is in immense pain, and its organs and masses plop out from between the bars. The flesh is angry and organs are out of place. Or rather, the organs are not where you expect them to be.
The fine lines of bed frames and the bulging bodies within them allude to a tree that triumphantly grows through a fence and consumes its metal bars. Louise Bourgeois’ many bed etchings demonstrate this with palpable intimacy. Hustvedt writes in an essay titled *My Louise Bourgeois*,

In art, the relation established is between a person and a part-person-part-thing. It is never between a person and just a thing. It is the aliveness we give to art that allows us to make powerful emotional attachments to it.

*My Louise Bourgeois* is not just what I make of her works, not just my own analyses of their sinuous, burgeoning meanings, but rather the Louise Bourgeois who is now part of my bodily self in memory, both conscious and unconscious, who in turn has mutated into the forms of my own work, part of the strange transference that takes place between artists.³
The material merging of the body into bedroom furniture expresses how sexual trauma stains the private spaces of the survivor. The place for healing becomes the place full of nightmares, and the body you exist within becomes a constant reminder of them. This sensation makes me think of a line from a Cleo Wade poem: “and perhaps that one thing that you have spent your life working around is the one thing you are meant to work through instead.”

Both realistic and representational, my sculptures emerge from the shamed, less pretty parts of reality that we tend to ignore or simply do not want to admit exists. These parts lie behind bedroom doors, beneath skin and under rugs. Artist Heide Hatry argues that we “permit difficult questions to linger unasked, hidden behind” a veil that we subconsciously construct because of comfort. For the rape survivor, the questions are that much more terrifying because the veil is made of shame and their very own body.

Behind my veil, I see myself as coexisting fragments. I tenderly care for each piece of myself, and I flinch away from them. Their festering forces me to consider that ignoring them has only generated more pain. Reminiscent of the greasy globs of fat removed during liposuction, diagnostic photos of rashes and the snake-phallus from my nightmares, my forms are materially grotesque in recognizable ways.

To express the all-consuming nature of healing from rape, my sculptures are also inspired by Kudzu-engulfed forests. Like that invasive species, they overwhelm bedroom furniture and invade personal space. When I feel triggered, welts emerge on my neck and my chest, along with intense heat and pressure. They creep across my body, claiming it like Kudzu. In a moment, I am once again a passive body in uncontrollable pain.

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk’s book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, explains how trauma inhabits the body somatically and psychologically. Reading this book showed me how I want survivors to feel when engaging with my work: heard and authentically represented. Dr. van der Kolk writes,

> As a therapist treating people with a legacy of trauma, my primary concern is not to determine exactly what happened to them but to help them tolerate the sensations, emotions, and reactions they experience without being constantly hijacked by them. When the subject of blame arises, the central issue that needs to be addressed is usually self-blame—accepting that the trauma was not their fault, that it was not caused by some defect in themselves, and that no one could ever deserve what happened to them.⁶

The social constructs that laid the groundwork for rape culture to emerge in the first place are the very same reasons a survivor feels such shame afterwards. My work addresses this difficulty in healing from pain in institutions that not only fail to recognize this pain, but also shame it.

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Rape leaves these meaty, weighty pockets of shame in and on a survivor’s body. Survivor Amanda Lovelace refers to them in a poem as “blackberry bruises” on her soul. My sketchbook note above articulates this from my perspective and *too much, not enough* makes it material. The millennial rug in this sculpture resided in my bedroom for seven years until I became so sick of seeing it every morning when I got out of bed. The matte, baby pink latex skin sprouts from the rug’s very patterning, thickening until it swells so much that the flesh envelops the rug. Writhing on the ground, *too much, not enough* embodies the parasitic nature of sexual trauma.

![Image](image.jpg)

Fig. 7 Maddie Grotewiel, *too much, not enough*, 2021; liquid latex, spandex nylon, bedroom rug I used for seven years, my used lace thong, Polyfil, gouache, acrylic paint, glitter, galvanized steel wire, acrylic gloss medium, wool felt, used bedsheets remnants, my great grandmother’s string; 5 x 35.5 x 49 inches; photographed by the artist. Behind: *snagged* (2020).
Dr. van der Kolk writes that trauma is often so difficult to address that a survivor will instead suffer “muscle pain, bowel irregularities, or other symptoms for which no cause can be found.” Essentially, trauma continues terrorizing the body, but the body struggles to process it, so the pain is redirected elsewhere to prevent the survivor from feeling the trauma, and this manifests in ways we can actually name. As an artist, this results in regurgitated spurts of words and wet, fragmented sculptures that have acne, rashes, hives, infections and scars.

My sculptures’ states of damage and dismemberment require me to be tender with the forms, to care for the ugly. When I hold them, I think of Robert Mapplethorpe’s portrait of Louise Bourgeois sweetly and strangely carrying one of her phallic sculptures. Rosalind Krauss writes about the recurring fragmentation in Bourgeois’ work, noting that the “partial figure” points to “the inescapable realism of the body whole.” For instance, you can easily identify part-objects that feel quite genital because of orifices, wetness and oblong forms. Seeing just the part, in this case, is not too much, but rather just enough.

The part consistently points to the whole within social constructs as well, like a thong alluding to a particularly sexualized woman. Underwear is a common material in my practice because of these connotations. The “unmentionables” I pick are well-worn, lacey and white to blend into gallery walls and wink at the incredibly holy construct of virginity. Like much of the
furniture ruined for my sculptures, the clothing items are also mine. I stopped wearing the see-through bra in *snagged* after my then-boyfriend berated me about wanting attention from men when I wore it. I cannot remember when I acquired any of the thongs in my sculptures because I have worn them for so long. In *too much, not enough*, a tiny, sparkly bow remains intact on the front of the underwear, representing the unfortunate naivety of navigating sexuality and identity in a world that sexualizes young girls as they bloom until they are deflowered.

![Image of Maddie Grotewiel's artwork](image)

**Fig. 9** Maddie Grotewiel, *too much, not enough*, detail, 2021, photographed by the artist.

In *too much, not enough* the latex coats the lace, turning the discarded thong into the raw body it is meant to protect. Clearly this entity has been violated in spite of any self-protection. Blending into the rug, *too much, not enough* seems neglected. The boundaries of my sculpted bodies are hazy and faded as they blur into my bedroom. Maybe these margins are forming for the first
time. In a poem titled all of it, Cleo Wade writes, "which parts of yourself won't you let yourself / love yet?"\(^{10}\) As I sit in my bed now, wrapped in the sheets and submerged in the duvet, I acknowledge all of my parts. The parts I dislike feel like tumors or little throbbing imposters in my private space. I made *sleeping with myself* (2020) out of items from my apartment and photographed it as we lived together last summer. It was disturbing, intimate and made me think of mothers doting on their newborns in infant photoshoots.

![Image of bed with various items](image)

**Fig. 10** Maddie Grotewiel, *sleeping with myself*, 2020; used makeup, cosmetic grade beeswax, unused trash bag, newspaper, liquid latex, thread, medical gauze, used dryer sheets, glue, leftover candle wax, acrylic gel medium, my bed as-is; 10.5 x 10 x 5 inches; photographed by the artist.

Just as my friend tenses up at an intersection she had a car accident in years ago, my bedroom makes me tremble. Discussing rape feels unspeakable because I am unsure if verbal language is quite adequate enough for the raped self to authentically convey the truth. Luce Irigaray stated that we “need a new language that is not the language of the patriarchy.”\(^{11}\) My practice explores the possibility of a new language coming from the materiality of the body in place of, or in
conjunction with, words. I sometimes wonder if there should even be a non-patriarchal language for expressing this because the problem is a direct result of the hetero-patriarchy and normalization of rape culture. I would rather the problem of rape not exist in the first place. When I consider the present language used to discuss rape, the survivor (often termed “victim”) is actually a sufficient label. After surviving rape, the survivor consistently has to re-survive because the trauma exists in their body, kept there by rape culture.

Rape is an ugly subject and uglier act, but expressions of the survivor can be cathartic and beautiful. Uncomfortably, nightmarishly beautiful. Rupi Kaur’s acknowledgement of the body’s ability to speak activates and empowers the silenced body of the rape survivor. Rape violates any presence of verbal consent, and society prefers that these topics remain hush-hush. Kaur bluntly addresses how sexual trauma has lasted within her body, writing that “parts of my body still ache / from the first time they were touched.” Traumatic memories exist at the site of the traumatic event, which is the body of the rape survivor. These body memories are activated through flashbacks as “somatic reenactments of the undigested trauma,” just like my hives.

Rupi Kaur

trust your body
it reacts to right and wrong
better than your mind does
- it is speaking to you

—Rupi Kaur
the materiality of goopiness

how social norms and bodily taboos impede healing from rape: confronted by sculpture
EXPECTATIONS OF ME even in 2020

PASSIVE, and waiting to be activated
PATIENT, and on their schedule
FLEXIBLE, but not easy
NURTURING, but not maternal
LISTENING, but also invested
SWEET, but not overly so
KIND, but not a pushover
INTELLIGENT, but not too smart
SOFT, also malleable
PRETTY, but approachable
SEXY, but not slutty
SENSUAL, but not whorish
EASYGOING, but not wishy-washy
PASSIONATE, but not obsessed
CONFIDENT, but not intimidating
OPEN, but not oversharing
Something glistens on the floor. You want to look away, but you remain there contemplating what you see. It is a white lace bra stuck in a puddle that is freckled with bubbles. As opposed to being dried up, this liquid seems active because of its goopiness. Like lava that hardens as it flows, these thick viscous layers invasively leak across the floor, forming folds that become the lips of a vulva. Dragged through fluids and piercing the wall, this is a vulnerable form. This is a vulva yanked from its clothes, from its own body. The presence of magenta-red blood, the irreparably torn bra and the lifting of that puddle into a threatening tongue confirm this is a scene of intimate violence. The physical connection to the wall ensures that the struggle continues. This trauma does not seem to have an end.

Fig. 11 Maddie Grotewiel, snagged, 2020; liquid latex, my used lace bra, acrylic paint, gouache, nail; 9.5 x 40 x 11 inches; photographed by the artist.
Discomfort arises in engaging with *snagged* because it embodies violated genitalia. Sensations of allure also come with viewing *snagged* because of its wetness and sumptuousness. If we are fully honest with ourselves, there is no fixed line dividing what lures us into looking deeper or forces us to turn away. This is actually a negotiable boundary, a space to occupy psychologically and physically. My work lives here, coaxing you into sensual engagement with taboo material.

The taboos that make talking about rape, and therefore healing from it, that much more difficult have deep roots. The list that precedes this chapter is my attempt to verbalize the teeter-totter I feel myself perpetually balancing as a feminine survivor of rape. Many sayings we learned as children have unfortunately skewed adult perceptions of self. First, “treat others how you want to be treated” ignores the fact that we should also treat ourselves well. Self-love is hard to learn after being raped. Forgiving myself for my rapes has been the hardest. Second, “if you can’t say something nice, then don’t say anything at all” evolved into this very peculiar norm that I could speak but only when I had good or sweet things to say. Today, it hurts to even press the keys down hard enough to type out that I have been raped. My fingers fight it.

Admitting the stains that rape left within me ruins the illusion that I am a perfectly impermeable human with all my yuckiness concealed beneath my skin. It feels like a confession to lift the veil, so shame keeps it buried deep. It is so deep now that it has the qualities of my own goopiness. As I continue to refer to goop, I feel it necessary to clarify that I am definitively not speaking about Gwyneth Paltrow’s absurd, overpriced lifestyle brand. I actually mean the wetness, slushiness and internal goop that makes up our human bodies. We all possess the capacity to acknowledge this because if you are alive, then you have goop inside of you in the form of blood, saliva, sweat, bile, mucus, etc. Whether we consciously think about it or not, we know that substances leave and enter our body, regardless of gender.
Orifices directly open up the body to the outside, and though organs like the esophagus and stomach are secured inside, they still physiologically occupy the corporeal threshold. Simply put, what enters your body is either absorbed into your being or leaves through another orifice. Each of my sculptures, aside from *snagged*, has multiple orifices—way more than a human would have without substantial wounds. The oral, anal and vaginal connotations of all of these orifices complicate the bodies further as they are simultaneously eroticized and violated. The metal bars of the bed in *deflowered* pierce this body while being swallowed by that very body. I painted the
bar with pigmented latex, let it dry, then rolled my hand up the post like a condom. This created lips around the metal and recorded the erotic action. In contrast to their unexpected states of abstraction, some of these visual components are recognizable, even if they are grotesque.

Abject theory addresses the implications of encountering this crossing of bodily boundaries. Essentially, the abject obfuscates that veil we comfortably exist under, revealing that we are penetrable and vulnerable. Just think of popping pimples, plucking in-grown hairs, or an exceptionally satisfying trip to the bathroom. Humans are fascinated by what emerges from bodies, so goop is inherently associated with allure and the grotesque. We expect and prefer bodies to be fully intact, but we know goopiness lies within us all. To be clear, it is not just the material of goop that is abject, but it’s crossing into the space outside of the body that is abject. Elaborating on this, Julia Kristeva writes,

> It is not then an absence of health or cleanliness which makes something abject, but that which perturbs an identity, a system, an order; that which does not respect limits, places or rules. It is the in-between, the ambiguous, the mixed. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the rapist without scruple, the killer who claims to save…¹⁵

Kristeva’s mention of the rapist is uncomfortably relevant to my work. Taboos placed on what lies beneath clothes or skin influence the shock of the abject. Art historian Frances S. Connelly calls the grotesque “a boundary creature” that “roams the borderland of all that is familiar and conventional.”¹⁶ This notion directly relates to Kristeva’s claim of the systemically disruptive power of the abject. This also names how a survivor of rape may feel towards their body: safe and exposed, familiar and alien, fragmented and whole, grotesque and in need of care all at once.
Naming it is painful because it makes it real. Sketchbook notes record my efforts to put words to it, like the one above. They all remain in my handwriting in this text because they are my words, and I can only speak from my own experiences and hope that survivors feel less isolated. These records often become titles for my work, as with *folding into myself*. I leave them in lowercase to reference to the beings’ states of transformation—they are finished artworks but in progress themselves. Like the final hours of food poisoning, my sculptures materialize that moment of visualizing the endpoint of healing but struggling to reach it.

A guy bought me the old wooden stool in *folding into myself* on a date for my twenty-third birthday, which feels both random and very relevant. It served as a drying rack for my latex-ed forms until I eventually permitted them to consume the stool. They grew from the woodgrain, expanding into scars and fat that clumpily encase the stool legs.

*folding into myself* is essentially an enormous peachy, magenta vulva that stands alone in the corner of the room, bashful and ashamed. The interior and the exterior of this body are blurred; the skin is made of the internal body. Shame skin. It is not necessarily inside out, but it is also not how a body is expected to be. Caving in on itself, it grips the stool with its slimy limbs made of ambiguous organs. It embodies a craving for intimacy and the accompanying struggle to have compassion for yourself after rape. I hug it sometimes.
Fig. 13  Maddie Grotewiel, *folding into myself*, 2021; liquid latex, spandex nylon, stool an ex bought me for my birthday last year, Polyfil, galvanized steel wire, gouache, acrylic paint, my great grandmother’s string, my used lace thong, used bedsheet remnants, copper wire; 45 x 21 x 20 inches; photographed by the artist.
As a rape survivor with a vulva, the suppressive norms and long-standing taboos surrounding the vulva facilitate and maintain this taboo-ness of expressing the aftermath of rape. One of the most taboo subjects is rape, which I understand for the act, but the discussion of rape should not be taboo because it makes healing much harder. In my work, this blockage manifests through quirks, awkwardness, glitter, lace, and the color pink. By being pretty and small and feminine and quiet, the topic is less directly addressed. It is covered up, masked by a layer of constructed femininity. I thought these pretty elements might make rape a more palatable subject, but it just suppresses the ugliness of rape. My sculptures are shedding this layer to reveal the truth.

Tess Thackara confronts the vulva taboo, writing that the grotesque is also “inherently associated with the feminine.”

Apparently, this “soft, squishy, feminine, maternal cesspool,” known as a vulva, “threatens the higher realms of categorical cleanliness.” This concept can be credited to the hetero-patriarchy as the insightful, phallocentric Aristotle “advanced the influential argument that a woman’s body is monstrous by nature.” Aristotle died, but his toxic words left imprints. Rape is an act, but it is part of the bigger problem of misogyny and rape culture.

The equally phallocentric Jacques Lacan’s claim of the “inferiority of female genitals” emphasizes the reduction of the person with a vulva to genitalia and sets up the stage for sexual objectification. Virginia Braun has also written on the extremes that society places on vulvas, that they are arousing and shameful or disgusting and beautiful. The vulva that bleeds is also the vulva that arouses. It is never an either-or when it comes to my private body. The societal normalization of simultaneously objectifying, aestheticizing, shaming, and violating the vulva complicates my relationship to my healing body.
The lasting reduction of women to purely bodies, but not pure bodies, incidentally presents an opportunity for goopiness to narrate the experience of healing from sexual trauma in a world that continues perpetuating rape culture.22

My raped self feels monstrous and full of holes, gaps, gashes. I am so good at being buttoned up like everything is a-okay that I feel painfully overwhelmed when I feel my seams begin to pucker. Instead of either-or, it is both-and, the in-between, the simultaneous, and the messy. The violated margins of my body keep me in this liminal space of the abject, evoked through my boundary-less bodies stuck within furniture. In deflowered, the snake has a head like the tip of a condom. It emerges from within the bed frame to bends around bars to approach the small, irritated, hairless “private parts” that bulge through the bars. These genitals never meet. Rather, they exist in a state of perpetually almost touching. Though deflowered contains many orifices, this snake never breaches any of them. The openings are all sealed shut or consuming the bedframe itself. This tactile “no” is a form of self-protection.

Similarly, the ooze from the damaged labial bra in snagged approaches the crack in the cement but remains on the cusp. It hesitates, never dipping into the crack, which confirms this scene is ongoing. I want my sculptures to be happened upon as dynamic situations of an active survivor, not a leftover victim. Simone de Beauvoir writes about the body being a dynamic situation itself, as opposed to being simply within a situation.23 de Beauvoir’s view acknowledges the material body’s complexity and capacity to be more than just a body for sexual consumption and/or violation. This reminds me of Hustvedt’s statement that “Experience happens to and in a body.”24 Utilizing the palette of the interior body, my sculptures are viscerally wetmesses that want to acknowledged. There is no value placed upon the goopiness of my works because their value lies in their presence.
My interest in that boundary and its relationship to repulsion and allure led me to Heide Hatry’s book *Not a Rose*. This collection of essays centers on Hatry’s photographic series of flowers made from slaughterhouse waste. Hatry lets the abject confront us by way of slimy, meaty, seemingly alive, flowery vulvas that remind us of our own ability to rot, fall apart, and leak liquids. As a flower made of a cow’s tongue, *Linguae saeta cervorum* (2011) demonstrates the capacity to feel equally allured and repulsed at the same time. Hatry photographs her deceptive flowers situated in nature, as if they belong there. This reminds me of how it feels to cohabitate with trauma because it catches you off guard. One moment you are cuddling with someone you care for deeply, and then you look down to see yourself in the fetal position. Glancing between them and your pile of limbs, you see that you have completely closed yourself. This re-
traumatization can occur during positive, very much wanted moments of sexual intimacy, which adds to the jarring process of sexual healing.

Hatry writes that her work is meant “to arouse reflection where there had been mere reflex.” Though she does not specifically discuss rape, the relevance of Hatry’s statement to my work lies in how society responds to survivors courageously recounting their trauma. The amount of suspicion that survivors face is preposterous because this was an atrocious crime committed against their body that they survived. The topic of rape is so often seen as an oh-God-let’s-not-discuss-that-ugly-subject, which is precisely why my work seeks to express the unmentionable.

Many seminal artists like Ana Mendieta and Hannah Wilke utilized their own bodies to make statements in their work about bodily autonomy. My experiences of being fetishized for my red hair have reinforced this feeling of being a material object for men to use as they please. Instead of using my own body, I study how combinations of wet and dry materials can replicate shamed body parts. In my studio, I spread out alongside piles of fabric, puddles of latex and squiggles of metal wire. I collect the results of these experiments, storing them on walls next to words hastily scribbled onto loose paper. As I cohabitate with my materials, the space becomes overgrown just like Kudzu.
Materials ultimately let us know when they are holding too much and must expel parts of themselves. Our bodies do the same; think of food poisoning again or a full bladder. Julia Kristeva writes that “abjection is immoral, murky, devious and suspect: a terror which is dissimulated, a smiling hatred, a passion which abandons the body instead of inflaming it.”

This description reminds me of catharsis. Lynda Benglis' ooze for the sake of oozing feels so legitimate to me. It cannot be contested; it is literally an ooze on the floor. It is also a recording of action as material, which reminds me of how rape shoves trauma into the body.

To evoke the torn-and-repaired seams of my own body, I use my hands to restrict and free my sculptures from themselves in an equally intimate and aggressive manner. I mend them with a needle and thread, which feels sexual, penetrative, and surgical. Textiles absorb my interactions with them, and their repairs produce seams like scars on skin. Like the many layers of our skin, I repeatedly brush liquid latex onto my forms to build up their own skins, or veils of shame. This results in rosy, blushing, irritated flesh that could be hair growing back, a rash, acne, a spanking, rough sex, exercise, an infection, or sexual assault. This textured skin appears in various states of concealment and exposure throughout my work. Skin protects the body’s interior, but my sculptures’ skin highlights their vulnerability.

![Lynda Benglis painting the floor with 40 gallons of pigmented latex; 1969; photograph by Henry Groskinsky. Retrieved from: https://www.frieze.com/article/lynda-benglis-pours-one-out](image-url)
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The previous page lists actions taken against my body. Collectively, these verbs read as forms of torture, reflected in the violated states of my sculptures. The uncanny materiality of my sculptures lure people in to touch, to hold, to graze with finger tips. Strangers’ fingers tend to immediately retract from my work, as if it electrocuted them. In contrast, I tenderly massage and caress my tactile sculptures once they are finished and in public spaces. These material intimacies embody the push and pull of love and hate that I feel towards my body and bedroom.

Unless it has an expiration date, then I always buy materials pre-owned for the purposes of sustainability and history. I often find little hairs and stains in used materials, indicating activity within and on the materials themselves. Writer Petra Lange-Berndt discusses how we can be complicit with materials, stating that “To understand materials is to be able to tell their histories.” 27 Materials carry history within them, just like our bodies. To address the fragmenting impacts of rape, my sculpted forms grow together and frequently become parts of each other. This calls on a line from a Cleo Wade poem: “and maybe I had been so busy looking for the pieces—I never noticed I was already together.” 28

The shamed, other-ed body of the survivor is thus inextricably connected to abject theory, aesthetics and power. The physicality of my sculptures is similar to the work of the Vienna actionists or Mike Kelley, but our common ground is purely aesthetic and nothing more. Their indifferent use of the abject contrasts the intentionality of my work. My sexual trauma has lain locked within my body for years. Pouring liquid latex on the floor freed me from trying to force my work into being palatable.

Sex therapist Dr. Wendy Maltz addresses this sensation in her book, The Sexual Healing Journey, writing that “Learning to live in one’s body after abuse is often a slow and gradual process.” 29 However, an erupting volcano cannot be stopped, much like a sexual climax or my
cathartic release of these sculptures. I can feel myself accelerating. By claiming space for themselves and encroaching on your space, my sculptures demand that you acknowledge them. These forms have crossed the corporeal threshold, and the division between public from private spaces. The truth of my work lies in its uncomfortable similarities to the muscles, sinews and organs within our own bodies. We keep this fact in the back of our minds, kept behind the veil. But the truth was bound to leak out, anyways.

Fig. 19   studio, photographed by Maddie Grotewiel, February 20, 2021.
the fragmented self/other

how a survivor’s notion of self becomes fragmented after rape: reclaimed through sculpture
I don't want to feel the pain, but the pain is also part of me, so I've become scared of feeling myself.
Healing from rape feels like lifting your covers to reveal a snake that is twisting amongst your bedsheets and tightening around your legs. The two of you wrestle, and in tearing the sheets off of the bed, you realize this snake is actually part of your body.

My sheets are a snake. The snake is also a penis. It is also a ballooned condom. A dildo. A turd. An intestine. It is a predator with me as its prey, but the threat is also made of me. This snake and my body are in conflict with each other and uncomfortably inseparable. Just as you might blush when nervous, I sometimes see myself grasping my own neck in Zoom calls. It is pretty disturbing to see myself being triggered or dissociating in real time. The weirder part is that it never feels like my hand. Visually, I cannot quite tell if it is or not. I rationalize that it is mine, of course, and I take a deep breath and call my dog’s name, Henry. He comes over and I hold his little seven pound self in my lap, which separates my legs from the sheets and the penis snake that haunts me.

Sexual trauma disrupts a survivor’s notion of bodily autonomy for many reasons, but significantly because the narrative of rape becomes locked in their material body. This demonstrates the flexibility of our bodily boundaries, that they fluctuate according to intimate and/or violent instances. Recording these experiences materially turns the survivor’s body into a trigger. Triggers can spark a dissociative state, kind of spacing off or not being fully present. This reflects the way that the survivor responded during the attack, which Dr. Maltz addresses, *your body belongs to you.* Internalizing this concept is essential to sexual healing because it is a way of undoing the false, learned self-concept that you are a sexual object. During and after abuse, many victims do not want or cannot stand to “be in their body.” Many victims cope with physical and emotional pain by “leaving” their bodies to some extent. A young rape victim, for example, may block out sensation and awareness of her body, mentally distancing her consciousness from her genital area during the attack. For many survivors, tuning out body needs and disowning body parts may have been a way of surviving the abuse.
deflowered embodies this sensation as a visually and narratively incomplete body-scene. The gaps and holes are both metaphorical and literal, addressing the violation of innocence that occurs when losing that beloved virginity to rape.

During a traumatic event, the mind and body go into survival mode and work together to protect their collective self by blocking out awareness of and sensation.33 Dr. van der Kolk claims that the out-of-body sensation “confirms what our patients tell us: that the self can be detached from the body.”34 This detachment is also referred to as depersonalization, in which “almost every area of the brain has decreased activation.”35 Depersonalization leaves survivors unable to process what is happening in the moment, so the recorded memories are often “quite

Fig. 20 Maddie Grotewiel, deflowered, detail, 2021; photographed by the artist. Behind: folding into myself (2021).
incoherent and fragmentary” and there is often “little or no story.” In spite of the alarming amount of survivors I know, I cannot recall anyone remembering their actual rape. While bodies are incredibly perceptive, they do not take absolutely everything we sense into account. Thus, traumatic memories take a sensorial form, like suddenly recalling how my rapist’s breath smelled or how the cold metal headboard felt against my cheekbone when he shoved my head into it. My sketch below illustrates this.

Different from an ache lingering in your wrist after a car accident-induced sprain, the imbedded trauma of rape comes with an addition of societal shame. Incidentally, the social dynamics that maintain a blanket of shame on the survivor are the same dynamics that caused the traumatic event of rape in the first place. Vocal and bodily autonomy are integral to my practice because I have felt silenced for so long, imposed by both society and myself. With this autonomy, my work seeps from private spaces into the public.
Tess Thackara notes that in contemporary art, “a younger generation of (mostly women) artists is going for full penetration—making artworks that speak to something deep in the body, producing responses that range from carnal to attraction to disgust.” Thackara’s articles introduced me to artist Jala Wahid, who makes visible the vulnerability of the wet, fleshy woman’s body. Wahid’s *Born From and Buried in Baba Gurgur* depicts a cast of the artist’s buttocks emerging from a platform, fully exposed but not fully intact. Significantly, the body is isolated, alone, objectified and turned into an object. In this way, her body is represented as “both powerful and yet subject to power and control.”

I have felt my body ripped open in my bed, but my bed has also provided a space to merge the fragments of myself. When looking at Wahid’s work, albeit through a screen, I feel
that my raped, disjointed self is accurately represented. The figure is simultaneously submissive and imposing, with a margin around her most private areas that begs me to relate it to my own. Dr. Maltz writes that because of rape’s violation of the bodily threshold, “many survivors have never learned they have a boundary” to their body.\(^4\) The bed has become my home, and I sink into it, letting it become me. In the poem below, Rupi Kaur recounts the struggle in finding her way home to herself after sexual trauma and specifically assigns blame to her oppressor.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{it felt like you threw me} \\
\text{so far from myself} \\
\text{i've been trying to find my way back ever since} \quad 4^2 \\
\end{align*}
\]

—Rupi Kaur

The internal body is our most private space, followed by our inherently permeable orifices. Having a vulva opens up the body in both directions to leak fluids, birth human beings, and have sex, or be raped for that matter. This permeability causes us anxiety because “When bodies spill out of their boundaries...they become something unsettlingly other.”\(^4^3\) The clearest separation of the self and other happens at birth, when the child leaves the body of the mother.\(^4^4\) Obscuring this boundary between \textit{self} and \textit{other} muddies the distinction between what is repulsive, taboo, and shameful versus alluring, attractive, and worth our engagement.

When facing \textit{snagged}, a glossy tongue unexpectedly rises upwards from its thick puddle like a predatory snake. A clear film covers the tongue in bubbles like spit, indicating that it is fresh and just splatted here. The tongue that emerges from the visceral, wet mess of \textit{snagged} complicates expectations of predator versus prey because the conquered blurs into the conqueror. This fluid interaction calls on the tree overcoming the fence and my stool legs that sprout leg hair. It is humorous to me that what is so shocking to us about the body is so normal, so common.
Even though it feels threatening, *snagged* is below you and relatively flat on the ground. There is enough space to consider this situation with less discomfort than if it was at eye level, or if the tongue was at a larger scale. My sculptures’ petite statures corroborate their age and generate an uncomfortable power dynamic because the subject matter is so violent and so sexual.

Encountering bodily objects naturally prompts sensorial, body-to-body relations because we interact with the world through our senses. We can easily find objects and materials that bear similarities to our physical bodies. The Italian expression *fiori carnosi* translates to “meaty flowers,” referencing the sensuousness, thickness and allure of flowers that seem visually similar to meat or labia. If I look at an intact vaginal flower, there is still a distinction between myself and the flower. If the vaginal flower is molding or leaking juices, like Hatry’s aforementioned flowers, then I feel discomfort because the boundary between my body and this bodily object has become messy. I am lured into engaging with an object that bothers me because of the deeper truth: the other is not so different from the self.

The power within the taboo vulva captivates me because it is so objectified, desired, and sexualized, but when owned and acknowledged from within, it is somehow a threat. I first visually felt the *umph* of this when viewing Hannah Wilke’s abject latex sculptures. The layered petals of fleshiness and material desirability of *Agreeable Object* (1972) forced me see my shamed parts outside of myself in a

![Fig. 23](image_url) "Hannah Wilke, *Agreeable Object*, 1972; latex and metal snaps; 70.8 x 43 inches."
raw, jarringly comforting manner. This body-to-body sensation dismantles the boundary between self and other to a much deeper degree than simply putting oneself into another’s shoes. Motivated by Wilke’s unapologetic self-expression in her work, my sculptures are simultaneously confrontational and yearning to be as celebratory. Expelling this revolting mess from my being makes it material, gives it a name, and detaches the shame from my body, making me see it less and less as solely my shame, if at all.

Fig. 24 Maddie Grotewiel, deflowered, detail, 2021; photographed by the artist. Behind: folding into myself (2021).

Abject theory thus functions to break down the patriarchal tone of critical discourse in terms of what is appropriate or not to publicly address. Physically and psychologically, distance provides a sense of safety towards potentially uncomfortable objects or ideas. This distance is significant for my sculptures because they refer to the threshold of the body, the ensuing fragmented notion
of self, and the boundaries of public and private. My sculptures coexist with each other, despite their individually implied senses of isolation. Looking at one of them, you cannot help but see the other through it. The bodies complete each other visually. Alone, they are violated and sad. Collectively, they permeate the space and make up a whole.

The pain is part of me, but the teeter-totter is adjusting. I have done much reflecting on it not being enough to make artwork about healing from rape—that filthy, rotting root in our bodies that spoils so much around it. But my body has held onto this for years and is ready to release. In all of this effort to have enough, say enough, be enough, I think of the Title IX report I made this spring that was dropped for not being enough. “Not to invalidate how you feel, but…”

After the Title IX meeting ended, I drove to my studio and wondered how many people I passed who also had this disgusting mess within their bodies. Carrying it, surviving. I began to feel the weight of it again, but not just my grief. It was others’ too. Returning to that very studio to make this very body of work about this very problem that still was not enough. I sat with these sculptures, these fragments of myself that I hate and love so much. I was suddenly filled with a visceral sense of empowerment in my body. It was righteous rage and sensual self-compassion at the same time. Most importantly, it was accompanied by the realization that this horrific ugliness that I had been trying to get out of my being was now right in front of me, and it was not my art.
conclusion
I didn't know I deserved more
The acknowledgement of my fragmented state as a survivor of rape feels inherently abject. The longer we spend with the abject, the more we begin to question why we were disgusted in the first place, what informed that prejudice. Instead of following an either-or mentality, we can feel allure and discomfort simultaneously. This is a powerful place to exist, a meaningful space where we can psychologically lift the aesthetic veil that ultimately fails to conceal the our authentic bodies. This liminal space in is the boundary of my body, of yours, of the artwork, of my bedroom, and ultimately of the private and public.

![Handwritten text]

Nearly two years ago I sat working on the floor, and a young stranger came into my studio. They thanked me for making work about sexual assault, but at that time, nowhere written in my studio—or on my work, for that matter—was anything related to sexual assault. Almost exactly a year later, I noticed I had been shoving my work into various holes that they were never going to fit into. In a conversation with one of my advisors, he cried out at me quite exasperated, “What is at stake for you?! I don’t think you’re admitting to yourself what your work is about.” I remember staring back at him—because I could see my reflection on Zoom—and then I told him. It had lain dormant in me for years, but now it trickled out. It started to gush. Nearly uncontrollable in its urgency, the next six months wrenched a series of vulnerable, raw sculptures and words out of my being. I wish I had asked their name because that student made me realize that a distinctly unwritten, but painfully understood visual language exists amongst survivors of sexual assault.
In creating and writing *unmentionables*, I have pulled myself out from under the rug. Cleo Wade writes in a poem that “The world does not need your silence.” With this body of work, I have found the voice that I did not know I had. It was stuck in my body, locked away in parts of my bedroom, and kept there by societal norms and shame. I am piecing myself back together, mending the fragments and letting some go. Now, my work doesn’t whisper and neither do I.
acknowledgements
unmentionables also owes thanks to countless individuals, especially the following: Amanda for encouraging me to candidly represent my truth, Sarah for knowing me better than I know myself, Priya for excitedly finding connections between my sculptures and the tumors she analyzes in the lab, Dryden and Bryce for problem solving with me throughout the making processes, Erin for encouraging me to stick to what I love: the voluptuous and the goopy, Sarah & Luci for gifting me the books of poetry that inspired me to write, Ryan for always finding the time to give my work a second opinion, and Seri for celebrating every moment of this process with me.
resources

for survivors and those who love survivors
be sweet to yourselves, every piece

Awakenings .......................... https://awakeningsart.org
Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network . . . https://www.rainn.org
MeToo WashU .......................... https://linktr.ee/SexualViolenceResources
& the texts in my bibliography
endnotes

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