

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Art and Mental Health: A Personal Narrative

By

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"Artificial Habitat" is a practice in "tongue-in-cheek environmentalism," where I pair the apparent beauty of nature with the less appealing effect humans have on their environment, often in one image. I don't attempt to implore the viewer to change their ways or criticize others, I simply offer images of our world for observation and contemplation.

The way I approach art making has always left me feeling detached from the viewer. The camera becomes a tool in which I can separate myself from the world and analyze it from a safe distance. My lens is simultaneously aloof, contemplative and isolated. The subject matter ranges from the organic to the obviously artificial, offering a perplexing understanding of myself, my life, and my thoughts. Some photos have flash and awkward lighting while others are taken in soft daylight, emphasizing the volatile nature of the world and my own fickle emotions. I examine the ways in which we interact with our environment, including animals, and how our environment reacts to us. My photographs suggest a world where every corner has been touched by human hands. With curiosity being my main motive, I consider how all people leave their marks on the world.

It's a common misconception that being mentally ill is a ticket to creativity. While there is a known and studied phenomenon of mentally ill people being more drawn to creativity, the matter is simply not that straightforward. My own struggle with mental health has had a significant impression on the art that I've made, but it's also had a hand in the art I haven't been able to make, or the art that never gets fully realized.

I started having noticeable mental health issues around the same time I began deciding I wanted to go to school for visual art. More or less, the progression of my struggle with mental health has gone hand-in-hand with my progression as an artist. My official diagnosis of depression was not until the end of high school, my first medication prescription was not until sophomore year of college, and I did not regularly take medication until my junior year of college.

Senior year of high school: I was alienated from my peers, feeling lonely and isolated. This

pushed me obviously toward depression, as I began self-destruction. My art classes offered only a confusing source of inspiration and frustration. It felt impossible to work when I felt so strongly that I would just make garbage, but not working made me furious with myself as well. Senior year was a tumultuous one, where I would sometimes be filled with creativity and excitement for my future, only to get crushed later when I didn't like how my work was turning out. I got the lowest score on the AP Art exam in my class, but I was still accepted to Alfred University as an art and design major.

I desperately hoped going to college would offer some kind of answer, and a way to connect with those around me. This turned out to be partially true, partially wishful thinking.

Foundations had been presented as something that would be challenging, and it absolutely was. My mental health was still un-medicated, and getting more and more out of control. After a massive falling out with my first roommate, I lived with another art freshman and gradually became more involved with my peers. Anxiety, the fear of being a “bad” artist, and a plethora of other insecurities prevented me from making friends for a few months after arriving at Alfred. Eventually, possibly just out of necessity, I began talking to others in class and hanging out with them more often. I still suffered from a lot of insecurity surrounding my art, but was comforted to learn that my peers felt the same way.

This comfort, of course, was interrupted by my brain that was determined to play tricks on me. Moments of relaxation, of time off were plagued with overwhelmingly negative thoughts: *Are you sure they like you? Are you sure they aren't texting each other right now, in front of your face, talking about how awful you are?* Sometimes, *still*, I find myself questioning the motives of those around me.

By sophomore year of college I had a steady group of friends—something I hadn't had in years—but still suffered from a brain that seemed to be taunting me with an inability to break free from depression.

The summer after sophomore year was perhaps the roughest summer I've had to live through so far. My depression spiraled out of control and I experienced an intense bout of self-hatred. The



Trees 3, 2016

relationship I was in at the time severely suffered.

I AM SORRY FOR ALL THE SPIT.

Junior year was a blessing. By the end of the previous summer, I realized how desperately I needed to be taking antidepressants, so I pressed my mom to make an appointment for me with a psychiatrist. Junior year *also* signified the beginning of the end of my 4-year-long relationship, but this ultimately allowed me to focus on art making. In a digital printmaking class, I got to experience using a DSLR camera on my own for the first time. Photography was something I had never considered in high school. For whatever reason, I had never owned a DSLR of my own and never really had the chance to use one.

I've never felt like I had a "process" when it comes to making art. Photography and printmaking seem to satisfy two contrasting ways of working for me. Photography feels much more in the moment (while deciding what to photograph and when), while printmaking forces me to plan and consider how the final piece will look. It's become clearer to me as I approach graduation that my attraction to these mediums lies in how easy it is for me to get lost in them. Photography and printmaking are both process-heavy ways of working and, as such, require a lot of attention. I could forget about everything else and just focus on creating this incarnation of an image, however I needed to.

First semester of senior year hit me suddenly. I felt completely unprepared. Unlike a lot of my peers, I didn't have any projects, sketches, or concepts from the previous semester that I was interested in pursuing. After taking a lot of photos that ended up being scrapped, I ultimately ended up taking flash photographs of the forests in Alfred, some of which *did* make it into my later selection of work. These photos had an intense, almost violent, quality that my later work did not. While I liked how some of these photos turned out, I struggled a lot with continuing to take them. The photographs were compared to horror movies, psychological thrillers. I am such a nonviolent person – with an aversion to

horror movies – that I felt like I was forcing forward a theme I didn't actually connect with.

IT'S OKAY, BABY GIRL.

Maybe she didn't really *know*, but Millie waited for me to come home to leave, and even then she waited until after Thanksgiving. Maybe she didn't want to ruin our holiday.

But maybe she was also as grateful as I was that I got to say goodbye the way I did.

She stumbled violently around my room until I gently scooped her up and placed her on the blanket. She felt so fragile, I was worried that even my weak hands could hurt her. I huddled close to the ground over her body that was struggling to breathe. I wrapped my arms carefully around her and cooed and cooed.

“Say goodbye, baby girl.”

I didn't take pictures for a while after that.

I knew that soon, I'd have to pick up the camera again, shoot anything and everything, and come up with a solid concept for my thesis. My only thread was a mild interest in shooting photos at a pet store. Having a limit on uncommon animal models made the pet store attractive to me.

ARTIFICIAL HABITAT

The fish tank looked disgusting. I paused. I knew most commercial pet stores have horrific animal husbandry, and that this fish tank was definitely overcrowded. I snapped a picture.

Being home was starting to get oppressive and stifling, in a different way than it had when my abusive father lived with us. My mom's boyfriend moved in full time and sold his previous apartment,



Moment, 2017

he and his son becoming more permanent fixtures at the house that I wasn't completely ready for. But my mother's happiness seemed so rare while she was with my father, I couldn't push back. So, I smiled sweetly at the entrance of *another* man I couldn't relate to and didn't really trust into my life.

EVERYTHING'S BEEN COMPLETELY DIGESTED.

I took the Benedryl and I took the Klonopin. The last number I counted up to was 6.

I misunderstood, and I was screaming. I was cursing. I was insulting.

He was on the phone with the police, I was in the ambulance. I was texting. I was texting, violently, and in the middle of conversations I didn't remember starting.

I was in the hospital.

I have not heard the voice mails I left.

Spring break was a shell-shocked isolation. I spent my time quietly, zoning out, minding my own business, being careful. I wearily took suggestions to talk to people, to therapists, to think about my future. It was obvious to me that my short trip to the hospital scared my mom, and she didn't want to imagine what could have happened. She was vibrant about getting me help and doing everything she could to make me feel safe and welcome. Instead, I felt strangely out-of-place. A guest in my own house, I also didn't feel like Alfred represented "home" either.

From this vantage point, I was able to take pictures around my childhood home with a distanced eye. This exploration is really what lead me to find the main theme of my "Artificial Habitat" body of work: isolation and detachment. I wandered around my backyard, camera in hand, while our other cat trailed along beside me like a golden retriever.

I returned to Alfred with photos taken outside my house that flowed perfectly with the ones

taken at Alfred. I could hardly recognize the difference once they were all starting to be installed next to each other. All the photos together tell a narrative of a confused, anxious, mentally unstable 22-year-old woman on the verge of graduation.



Pensive, 2017