

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

"Pressure Points"

Leana R. Quade

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Leana R. Quade, MFA

_____, Thesis Advisor

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Introduction

The process of transformation and the idea of finding or creating a revelation are fascinating. How can a change of emotional state be mimicked? How does it appear? How does an alteration of personal perspective happen?

I considered these questions as I was sitting on the dock at Foster Lake experiencing an emotional transformation of my own. Watching the water flow and ripple in front of me, the reflections of sunlight glistening off the highpoints of the waves, listening to the calm repetitive sounds of the waves hitting the dock and the sand. I feel the stress of my day subsiding, the frustration fading and the calmness of the environment transforming my mood and the energy around me. Graduate school has pushed me out of my comfort zones and I am questioning everything from my ideas, my work and especially myself. These stresses have altered my creative process both, by creating barriers, questions or ideas to making work, yet fueling new ideas and using art making as therapy. The lake has been a therapy, and is my way of finding order when in chaos. I come to this place often, to be near the water, to find solitude, and a way to change my perspective.

Staring at the water that day on the dock, I wondered how I could create artwork that mimicked this change of an emotional state, this feeling and alteration of personal perspective. Thinking about this I realized that some of my work already creates new viewpoints and exposes viewers to new ideas, thoughts or feelings. For example, my glass slinkies show viewers how strong yet flexible, and resilient glass can be. And videos I created in the past show off the

molten states of glass which people rarely seen. These works give a new outlook to glass and its other uncommon properties, making viewers see the material in a new way.

Perspective, or how we frame or re-frame our personal experiences, is something that we can be in control of, and something that can make or break the energy, course or spirit of our day our feelings and our environment. We may not believe that we have control of our environment or feeling during a moment of anger, disappointment or loss. But by changing our viewpoint or perception of a situation, by stepping away for a moment, giving it time or just being patience or participating in a different activity, one can discover many viewpoints of the same entity.

Sitting on the dock that day inspired me to make a piece that could create or emulate that feeling of change, contrast and duality. Duality is everywhere: without frustrations, one could not find harmony; without darkness light cannot exist. It is this ying and yang of elements of life that I aspired to create in a piece of artwork. Being a glass artist I have been always been interested in making glass act differently than the common properties glass is known for, and is still a goal in my work. I continue this idea of pushing materials and exploiting properties to offer a new way of seeing something, whether it's a feeling, observation or a surprise.

Three pieces from the show *Pressure Points* explore how an interaction with artwork can change perspective. Viewers are offered new ways of seeing and perceiving materials; the use of time, light and observation pique the

curiosity and arouse the hippocampus, a section of the brain, thought to be the center of emotion, memory and the autonomic nervous system.

Soothing Anxiety (Image 1 & 2)

Soothing Anxiety is an installation. The viewer enters a hendecagonal room that is a physical representation and surreal environment of the experiences and emotional headspace of being overwhelmed and stressed: thoughts and emotions racing, destroying any chance of focus. The room expresses the dualities of emotions from discomfort, tranquility, bewilderment, annoyance, stability, disturbance and contentment.

The nearly circular shaped room is constructed out of eleven vertical segments. Each segment is 80 inches tall by 17 inches wide and holds five 16 by 16 inch panels, made out of cast glass, hydrocal or wax. On the interior side of each panel are twelve protruding tetrahedron shaped points that face the viewer.

These points represent negative thoughts or worries. Researchers Don Norman and Neil Gains both agree that humans have an innate tendency to prefer objects with smooth contours over those with sharp angles or points. Objects with sharp and pointed features activate the amygdala, a region of the brain associated with fear processing, priming a subconscious mechanism, which has evolved to detect external threats. Consequently the points of these panels seem

threatening when up-close and when put together form an overwhelming structure. Yet at the same time Neil Gains states:

“In fact, such reactions mean that objects with pointed and angular features are being processed at a “deeper” level in the brain, which means they are also more interesting and thought provoking. This is not surprising if the reaction is linked to our built into our mental mechanisms for identifying and reacting to threats in the environment engaging our attention more directly and emotively. Thus, angular objects are more effective at attracting attention and engaging consumers, whereas rounded objects are more effective at making a positive emotional and aesthetic impression. This is an important rule of thumb for designing any object or system.”

Therefore, according to Gains by being surrounded by these tetrahedron points within the room puts one into a deeper level of mental or emotional state. The tetrahedrons are arranged in a repetitive geometric pattern, which create an overall continuous pattern giving the room an endless feel, similar to the felling one may have when feeling lost in an emotional state.

These triangular forms break up the grid-like pattern created from the metal structure and the stacked square panels. In unison, the interlocking metal frames and the stacked square panels visibly breakup the endless pattern from the numerous points inside the room. The hendecagon structure of the room is formed by the placement and slight angle of each wall segment, establishing stability and strength to the room. With the angle of each segment, the points on all the panels exist at slightly different angles. This generates tension against one another and gives the room a feeling of compression and anxiety. According to

The square panels of *Soothing Anxiety* display a pattern similar to textured soundproofing foam. However, unlike foam, the glass panels amplify and ricochet noise within the room, symbolizing the constant jumble of thoughts, ideas, apprehensions, and questions in one’s head. This room of pointed panels

creates a feeling of anxiety, tension, stress, and fear, but, strangely, at the same time it exhibits a pleasing visual pattern of order and symmetry – the desire to achieve order when in chaos. The feeling caused by the points and the pointed surface represent the unobtainable expectations put on oneself or, perhaps the idea of being “under pressure”.

Entering the gallery you are drawn to the circular room instantly. The bright flickering lights draw your attention like a flashing neon sign inside a storefront. You can't see the entrance or interior of the room at first, but as you approach it you realize the small interior is covered in triangular points. Some are transparent and glowing with colors as the video changes, while other points are white and changing shade from the reflective colorful light from the glass points. The room is alive at moments, but dwindles into darkness. In the darkness your attention is now focused on the multiple points and texture of the room, they are orderly yet jumbled. Suddenly the room lights up in color. Warm pinks, oranges, purples and blues are dancing around making the room chaotic, yet the calming colors sooth and relax the viewer. The busyness of the lights distract the thoughts of the viewer, like a calming feeling of sitting in front of a campfire.

Standing in the room there is a range of experiences one may have, from moments of tranquility, flashes of anxiety, to mindless moments getting lost within the dancing patterns surrounding you. This moment of mental distraction is the goal. Moments in the room can seem dark, lifeless and cold, but suddenly the space sparks to life with light, projections of warm soothing colors are emitted in a sinuous mystical fashion from three video projectors. The slow, calm

movement of varying shades of blue, orange, pink, purple and gold may evoke the feeling of bliss and serenity as the viewer becomes lost in the motion of light. Reflections bounce off the hundreds of tetrahedrons points, shadows change, disappear and reappear. As light hits the glass panels it becomes distorted, refracted and amplified by the angles of the protruding tetrahedrons. The hundreds of triangular points act as prisms that bend, twist and alter the light from the video projections. The video projections are not simultaneous therefore the display in the room is never the same, creating a different experience for each viewer. This experience can be compared to sitting by a campfire and getting mentally lost while observing the movement and flickering of the flames. The room is the mental stress and the calming water at the lake is like the calming display of colors from the video projections.

The exterior of the room is much different than the interior, being flat with simple subtle textures, making the facade seem less threatening than the spiked interior. The backsides of the panels are flat, yet vary with subtle texture to capture, play and alter the light from the video projections. Utilizing another unique material property of glass, which is absolutely amazing, is it's simultaneous reflective and refractive properties.

Several backs of the glass panels are clear; therefore the projected light passes through it as well as bounces off it. The exterior glass acts as a mirror, reflecting moving projections outwards onto the ground, the wall, and anyone walking around the room. The reflections replicate the reverse triangular pattern however, since the tetrahedron shape acts as a prism it triggers depth and

distortion of the shape generating an abstracted version of their reflected panel. The reflections outside the room flicker, dance, and change as the videos transform the surroundings with light and color. Since the segments of the walls are at different angles the reflections are thrown about at opposing angles, and with the three projectors there are more reflections than panels. These overlapping reflections become nearly impossible to correlate to their original complementary panel and seem to appear magically and out of nowhere. The reflections are the endless amount of past worries, thoughts, feelings, frustrations and fears that are no longer troublesome but still deep in our mind. These reflections have faded over time, solved, liberated, or now recognized as unimportant, and have become only jumbled memories of our past.

Connecting Insecurities and Silent Sentinels (Image 3)

Connecting Insecurities consists of two large photographs - two images of a bare female figure covered with random black straight lines. Directly in front of the prints, on the floor is a barricade of white plaster tetrapods¹: the *Silent Sentinels*. The viewer cannot get up close to the prints, which reflects the barrier people put up or develop when dealing with personal insecurities.

¹ Tetrapod info - The shape of a tetrapod is a balanced form made up of four identical truncated cones emerging equilaterally from one central point. If you separate these four truncated cones, and look at the interior cross-section, the large end of the cone has three equal sized triangular sides, also known as a tetrahedron. The tetrapod form is inspired from the concrete sea wall barriers piled along the coastlines of Estonia during my travels to Europe a few years back. When stacked these four-pronged forms create an interlocking structure that protects the coastline, yet their amorphous structure allows water to flow freely between them.

The prints are frameless, exposing the vulnerable raw edges of the paper reiterating the nakedness and vulnerability of the figure. The print on the right is of the female's back directly from behind. While in the left print she is photographed somewhat from the front, she is slightly turned and is looking down towards the ground. According to studies in body language her downward gaze can represent several things. When someone looks down at the floor a lot, they are probably shy, timid, or embarrassed. People also tend to look down when they are upset, or trying to hide something emotional. People are often thinking and feeling unpleasant emotions when they are in the process of staring at the ground. Therefore her downward gaze suggests her lack in self-confidence and her concerns of body image.

At first glance one sees the black lines covering the figure as an overall geometric pattern composed of triangles, diamonds, and trapezoids. The lines have been created by the simple task of connecting the dots on her body. They hide and detract from the birthmarks, creating a surface pattern that draws the eye to the overall form and curves of the figure, competing for balance. This pattern on the female seems haphazard and can be seen as a net or a second skin of the figure. As you see the pattern you become more aware of the female body as an overall form and entity. The elegant curves of the figure against the contrast of straight dark lines create a new surface and visual that shows off the form of the figure. The linear shapes appear to add dimension or seem flat at times and the straight lines almost seem to bend at certain points. Because of these bold lines and randomness of the pattern, one does not notice that these

lines are actually connecting the birthmarks of the figure. The viewer is given another way to see flaws as a greater, beautiful object. Until one reads the title “Connecting Insecurities” or they get closer to see that the placement of the lines actually connect moles. This pattern created a new way to look at these flaws, these insecurities of the female gives the viewer a way to see these marks as elements that create a greater, beautiful object.

The overall pattern of the black lines can be seen as amorphous similar to the structure of glass. This amorphous structure or visual pattern is represented in some way within every piece of the exhibition, bringing everything together. For example, this geometric yet amorphous pattern created from the black lines can also be seen in, *Silent Sentinel*, a pile of tetrapods* piled just beneath the prints. *Silent Sentinel* is a pile or barrier made up of three different sized tetrapods and tetrapod parts.

The mound of tetrapods is both a barrier between the viewer and the prints as well as a physical representation of the psychological barriers created in life. The tetrapods are made out of white pottery plaster, which is a solid yet brittle material, playing on the duality of their purpose. The pure white color was chosen since psychology research considers the color white represents purity, cleanliness, new beginnings, mental clarity, innocence, protection, softness, and perfection. Therefore the use of white helps strengthen the symbolism of safety, beauty, and serenity.

This pile of tetrapods is both physically and metaphorically protecting the female in the large prints above. This pile is both a barrier to protect her physical

insecurities concerning the flaws of her body as well as the emotional barriers created from uncomfortable interactions with other people. The tetrapod form is strong and when piled, can withstand the force of waves yet allows water to pass thru freely. Similar to the water in nature, in this piece the words and actions of others are the force that the tetrapods protect the figure from. Even though they are strong some actions pass thru affecting the confidence of the female.

The geometric forms create a pile that looks visually disorganized yet the interlocking shape of the tetrapod creates structure and strength. This contrast of chaos and structure is repeated throughout the exhibition. This brings the viewers back to the connections and ideas of how experiences or activities can change someone's perception of a situation or feeling.

Release (see Image 4 and video)

Release is a video performance displayed on a television while a white pedestal sits in front of the screen with shattered glass on and all around it. This performance creates a powerful feeling of fear, anxiety and stress for the viewer as well as the performer. It also displays the amazing properties of tempered glass that are not obvious: its flexibility and resilience.

A figure appears wearing a face shield, gloves and ear protection and stands in front of a large piece of glass with a ratchet strap around the glass lengthwise. Slowly clicking the strap one click at a time, the strap shortens and tightens on the glass. Because this glass is tempered², thin, and large, it is rigidly

² Tempered glass is unlike normal window glass in that it is treated after it is cut, either by heat treatment or chemically treated. The glass is heated and then

flexible. As the strap tightens the glass begins to bend. Click by click by click the viewer watches the figure, who is clearly stressed - scared yet bold - bend this glass to its breaking point. Viewers are first shocked to see that the glass is bending, then they realize it will eventually break, and may cause harm to the performer. The viewer participates in the process feeling tense, scared or curious anticipating how the glass is going to react to such great tension.

When watching the four-minute video, viewers are captivated and locked to the screen for the entire four minutes. People stop breathing while watching the figure slowly click this piece of sheet glass towards destruction. In the blink of an eye, unexpectedly and without warning, when the glass cannot take any more stress, it explodes. Viewers jump back and some even scream. This reaction is most exciting.

Release Monologue

Armed with a ratchet strap and a single of piece door sized sheet glass, I went into an empty gallery space to test my idea. Wrapping the ratchet strap around the longest length of the glass and connecting it back on to itself, I began the terrifying process of bending this piece of glass to its breaking point. Knowing the properties of tempered glass, the entire morning I was nervous, anxious,

rapidly cooled to temper the glass. After the tempering process, the exterior of the glass is under extreme compression creating strength to the glass. The glass is very strong when you apply pressure or force directly to the surface of the glass, However when the tempered glass is hit on the side or the edge is nicked, the glass blows up into thousands of tiny fragments. These fragments are the result of the temper process, which arrange the glass molecules into their amorphous structure.

excited; my stomach was in knots and I could barely focus on my morning tasks before I tested this new idea. So without planning, without over thinking, I setup this test along with four video cameras to capture my crazy theory. Every click of the ratchet strap was like a step closer to jumping off the high dive in high school. It was like watching a horror movie where you know something scary is about to happen but you just don't know when. The glass took way more force from the ratchet strap than I had ever imagined. I felt the glass was going to snap near the beginning of the process, and yet surprisingly, the glass bent almost into the shape of the letter "U" until it finally snapped, and blew into a thousand pieces. It took me almost twenty minutes to get the glass to its breaking point. The result was better than I had planned and the video was powerful, wonderful and created the emotional change I desired.

During every moment I clicked the ratchet strap I felt it was going to burst, my hands were shaking, my body was tense, and I was sweating even though I knew what I was doing. The stress and anticipation of the moment of release was unknown yet seemed always so close. During the process of creating enough force with the strap I had become so nervous, tense, scared and tired that I had to pause every once in a while to muster up the courage to continue. I had underestimated how much force the glass would take. I had started with the sheet of glass resting on an almost 3ft tall pedestal, not knowing or thinking how much the glass would bend. Two-thirds of the way into breaking the glass the strap was too high for me to reach and I had to use a stool to get high enough to

reach the handle of the strap. This action in the video also strengthens the emotions for the viewer during the piece.

Conclusion

These three pieces in *Pressure Points* all deal with changing emotional moments or states of being. In different yet similar ways, each evolved from my experience at the lake; the emotional change is what I wanted to achieve. In *Soothing Anxiety*, viewers become mentally lost and distracted by calming visual displays in the room changing or creating altered feelings. In *Connecting Insecurities and Silent Sentinels*, one's view of flaws and weakness are changed to views of beauty and strength. In *Release*, the fact that a large piece of tempered sheet glass can express a rollercoaster of emotions is remarkable. This piece only took twenty minutes to create, but it was the strongest piece I made during my time at graduate school. Release is a metaphor for my entire two-year experience at Alfred where, I found satisfaction in the final results and completion of my goal. I am encouraged to continue exploring the theme of artwork, which elicits emotional change through material processes.

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