

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Buried / Encased / Embedded

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Abstract

Traumatic events and hereditary elements play a role in how our identity and body take shape but, are these factors also inescapable: is our parents' history a prophecy of what will also limit us? I am interested in how the economic and societal conditions of previous generations impact both the living and those yet to be born. Through my artistic practice, I confront the difficulties within my own experience in an attempt to find softness and empathy in a family that copes with mental illness. My work brings attention to damaging cycles that come from attempting to ignore or bury trauma.

Domestic space and the unseen body allow me to address our most difficult interpersonal relationships. Through my performance work, the body becomes a vessel that endures the traumas, both experienced and inherited, through labor. In other cases, the body is absent from a domestic setting, but the trace implies that we hold space for those who have passed in our lives, for better or worse. My artistic practice is focused around creating experiences that evoke this type of emotional complexity that I have experienced, allowing space and time for the viewer to critically consider their own relationships. Through the use of space, materiality, and body, I transform these habitual ways of dealing with trauma into moments of reflection that can lead to empathy, inherently beginning a new cycle of healing.

Dedication

For my family, who finds laughter even in the most difficult moments.

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Introduction

I am interested in the ways in which healing and connection can be achieved in situations of interpersonal, codependent trauma and abuse. As a child of divorce in a family with a history of diagnosed mental illness, I am well versed in pervasive experiences that are complex and harmful. Growing up, each member of my immediate family navigated various states of anxiety, depression, and a case of undiagnosed Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD).

In this exhibition, I investigate how familial histories influence the living members. I explore how the socioeconomic expectations of previous generations leave traces on the mental health and wellbeing of the living. I am specifically interested in demonstrating that the generational entanglements within our families are much too complicated to attempt to place blame on any one individual. By interrogating elements of my childhood domestic space using installation and performance, I expose the complex subtleties of living in a distressed home. I uncover and acknowledge the hurt perpetuated in domestic spaces that are meant to be our most safe and loving environments.

I instill softness and empathy in these traumatic memories in an effort to repair what has been broken and end the generational cycles of pain. Recollection can be deceptive except in cases of intentional, objective reflection where such actions can help gain clarity. By presenting the work in this way, I aim to help people validate their own trauma and help them begin their journey toward transforming these destructive cycles.

Welcome,

As you enter this show, be aware that this work may be challenging. Trauma is a core element and should not be taken lightly. I encourage you to explore discomfort, but if at any point the experience is too overwhelming, please give yourself space. I understand that I ask a lot with this work because I asked it of myself first.

With warmth,

X

Letter to the Viewer: A Content Advisory from the Artist

Welcome,

As you enter this show, be aware that this work may be challenging. Trauma is a core element of this work and should not be taken lightly. I encourage you to explore discomfort but, if at any point the experience is too overwhelming, please give yourself space. I understand that I ask a lot with this work because I asked it of myself first.

With Warmth,

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The Lost Ones

"You're the normal one." she said to me.

"The normal one? What do you mean?" I asked, confused. That term could not apply to me.

"You were the youngest. You didn't experience it the way we did because you were too young to understand. You're clearly the most well-adjusted of us."

"Oh. I don't know if that's true." I said quietly. "Maybe...I don't know."

As empathy is the core of my investigation, it is the first encounter my viewer has with the work. The content advisory is the first element that is visible within my show. It is a large vinyl text on the entrance wall; a handwritten letter allowing the viewer to decide how to test their emotional boundaries. There are many different definitions and examples of empathy within art and culture, but I will reference it through my own interpretation:

Empathy is an emotional, cognitive response that require one to use
their own life experience to understand and feel the experience of

This shift of personal perspectives drives connection and vulnerability between two people. Maintaining this connection means refraining from judgment and continuously reaching for the emotions that allow both individuals to understand one another.

Transparency, the project from which this body of work evolved, developed into the exchange of this type of empathy between myself as the artist and my viewer. At the entrance to my show, before any other work can truly be inspected, bruises encased in glass are presented on a white, round kitchen table. Below them is a vinyl, handwritten note like the letter above:

"I am grateful to you for taking on the energy within this exhibition and offer you a bruise encased in glass in exchange. This bruise is yours to keep and to do with what serves you most. A bruise is the way skin acknowledges trauma and indicates healing. In the same way, I acknowledge your trauma and provide these objects to focus your energy."

These thin pieces of fused glass vary slightly in size but are meant to fit in the palm of one's hand. Each fusing has various bruise-like colors muddled within the layers of the smooth glass form. Some bruises appear fresh with colors of deep blue and purple, while others range in various states of healing, speckled of red or a yellowish hues. On the textured underside of each piece, there is a relief, slightly larger than a thumb. This relief and the size of the object is evocative of a worry stone, a small, sensory object used for self-soothing in times of distress. I offer these bruises to the viewer as a way to focus their energy and contemplate any discomfort within the show.

Bruises are the result of physical trauma to the skin. In instances of abuse, these physical traumas are the result of the actions of others. If these symbols of physical pain are consistently present on the skin, outsiders start to investigate the potential of abuse. However, when the bruising is hidden or fades, the victim is often left to bear these harmful cycles alone. This resignation is even more common for those whose trauma and abuse does not leave marks; it continues, unseen and unheard.

The bruise as a physical trauma itself is temporal, it is experienced only in the period that it exists. The emotional trauma that persists long after the bruise disappear is not always apparent. The giving of these permanent bruises is an acknowledgement that the effects of trauma last much longer than the initial action. It is a message to the viewer that they are not alone in their experiences.

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After claiming these objects, my hope is for these mementos serve you through the emotional labor of processing trauma and that your relationship to the bruise is representative of that. Perhaps you leave them at the bottom of your bag and the history exists, but as a carried reminder of what you have overcome. In another case, you may decide the constant reminder may be too much, and you throw the glass away in a symbolic gesture. You may choose to visibly carry the bruises with you as a beacon to others that you have experienced hardship and are a safe harbor for those desperate to find an ally.

I chose bruises as my catalyst for connection because this experience of pain and adversity is universal, this shared experience is what makes empathy and allyship possible. For years, I was told that I must have been unaffected by my family disfunction and I actively tried to meet that expectation. I told myself that other people had it much worse and that if I were affected by the events in my family, it would only make their lives harder. This mindset of remaining silent, ignoring pain, and putting others first is common in children who have family members affected by mental illness. In psychology, this personality type is known as “the lost child”. To connect with others in a similar situation and begin healing, I made invisible pain visible to represent the many experiences of those who hide or ignore their trauma for the sake of others: The lost ones.

I chose glass as it is a particularly alluring material, drawing the viewer in to inspect these objects up close. On the white kitchen table, the various colors of the physical healing are striking. In a group, these bruises speak to a collective trauma, but

each claiming is a validation of the viewer's own personal trauma. Once the bruise is lifted off the table, the bodily colors shift and meld inside the glass. The true intent of the transparent material becomes clear once placed on the skin and perceived as if the bruise is marking on their own body.

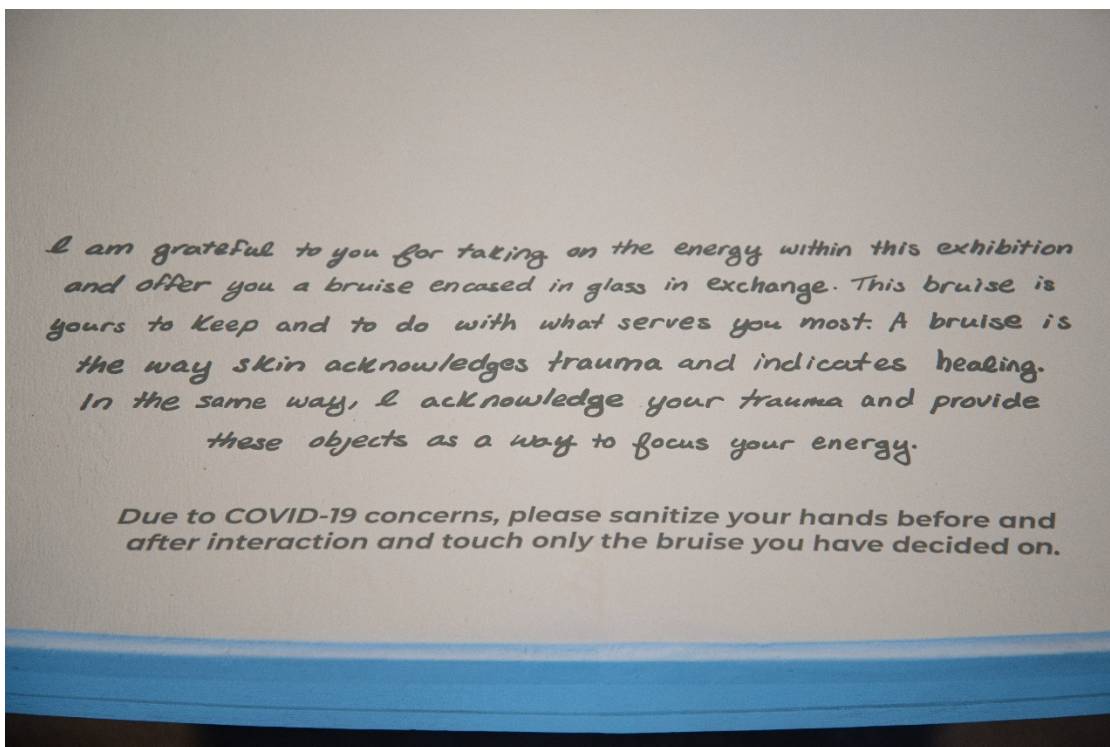
In the gallery the entrance is also the exit therefore, this empathetic interaction is the first and last work that is experienced. For those open to the intrapersonal challenges my work presents, I offer the viewer this bruise in exchange for the baggage, time, and vulnerability they bring to this artwork. Even if this experience is not overwhelming, the audience walks away with a memento which serves as a reminder of my work and the message it carries. This object, once removed from the gallery, is a trace of the connection between myself and the viewer.

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False Expectations

My mother provided me with some wisdom when I was a teenager.

“If there’s anything I have learned in my life, it’s that people only get upset when expectation does not meet reality.”

It struck me then, yet I’m still not sure I knew the full weight of those words at the time.

I certainly do now.

As children, we learn most of our behaviors and beliefs from our parents or primary caregivers. As we gain independence, we learn that these role models are humans with faults, malice, and mistakes to go along with their better natures. These come from questionable beliefs and expectations which are often woven into the greater fabric of societal expectations. This can make the truly insidious, damaging messages difficult to recognize and interrogate because there is no one source. The type of ingrained beliefs that I focus on within my work are family, mental illness, and what it means to be successful. The reason I have chosen these three concepts because, if unchecked, they continue a harmful cycle that effects future generations. They have been pervasive in my life and have affected my understanding of interpersonal relationships starting with familial ties.

Family can be simply defined as being related to someone through common ancestry but, in my experience, there are many expectations placed on members of a family beyond this basic understanding. While what genders and roles a family is comprised of has shifted over the past few decades, the ideal that family provides unconditional love and support has not. The domestic home is still supposed to be where your family safely and lovingly cohabitates, whatever that family looks like. The oldest members of the family are expected have the wisdom necessary to care for and guide the

younger members toward a successful and happy life. In order to reach the same or greater life of their elders, the young members must have respect and not question that wisdom and authority.

This brand of life is sold to us as someone who has found sustainable fulfillment in all the components of their life yet, our society has very specific definitions of what fulfillment should look like. Expectations of marriage, occupational fulfillment, financial success, parenthood, emotional intelligence and self-awareness, and fruitful social engagement with a touch of activism can all be found in abundance on different media platforms. These are all burdensome expectations, and for the most part, they exist on binary terms: you either have it all or you are failing. However, these are just fabricated conceptions of how life should be experienced causing the perception of failure when the reality is life is much more complex. This becomes apparent as generation after generation attempts to live differently than the ones that have come before. Yet, by continuing to repeat the same patterns of maintaining such high standards for themselves, the distorted cycles continue.

As the youngest in my family, I had very little time with my grandparents. Much of my understanding of that generation within my family comes from second-hand stories told from reminiscent stories over dinner tables or during holidays. I do remember their carefully curated homes and where and how children were welcome. As I grew older, I began to piece together the limitations I experienced with similar stories my family told. This painted a picture of what the priorities were of both sets of grandparents and how those histories impressed a set of expectations onto their children which stayed with them throughout their lives. As I age, I recognize the same cycles in my siblings and

myself. *Inherited and Insidious* is an installation that investigates the act of subconsciously perpetuating unreasonable and misguided expectations in the wake of previous generations long after they have passed away.



In approaching the installation, there is an immediate, complex absence. The arrangement represents the untouched room of a deceased loved one. It is tucked in the furthest corner of a Persian-style rug with floral patterns of mustard, burgundy and walnut and a tattered, off-white fringe. On the small side table sits the only source of light, an incandescent table lamp with a taupe, tapered cloth shade and bulbous, gold base. The table is a hexagonal shape made of a dark wood. The thin, hourglass-like legs have a secondary shelf that hovers just above the floor. Where each

leg meets the tabletop, there is a small, graphic relief carving of two acorns on a branch. This table is positioned next to a cream-colored, velvet upholstered wingback chair. There is an embroidered pillow on the seat and the legs of the chair are made of a dark wood that curve down to paw-like feet. Beneath the shade of the lamp on the side table, there are two empty picture frames with nothing but black showing through the protective glass. In front of the frames sits an empty diamond-shaped, crystal-cut candy dish. On the bottom shelf of the side table is a wooden sewing box made of a simple warm wood that has a basket-woven sides. The hinged lid is upholstered with embroidery depicting a close-up view of pink, blue and green wildflowers.

The whole installation has a thick layer of seemingly toxic, yellowish dust. It indicates a continued stillness and absence of the individual who no longer exists in this space. The dust seems heavy under the dramatic light, adding physical weight to the moment frozen in time. When combined, the found objects, dust, and quality of light, typically familiar to a home, create a paradoxical atmosphere. This is amplified by the two shadows in the dust where objects have been removed from the side table. A third picture frame has been carefully picked up, along with a needle and thread, leaving perfect outlines. The viewers sense of space fluctuates from being in the deceased's home to being in a gallery, critically viewing an artwork.

The viewer's sense of space is also altered by the physical distance forced upon the viewer by the inability to step onto the carpet. I use physical space as a material to reinforce the distance felt when someone passes away and again, the stark lighting takes this sense of loss in and twists ominously. Unoccupied space is also used as a material to indicate what is not there, the absence of body. The chair has minor evidence of

use, making it evident this space was well kept, maintaining a pristine façade. Together, the found objects and outdated designs hold a nostalgic, locational context, making it clear that this work is based on my own memory. However, the empty photo frames and candy dish allow the viewer to fill the space with aspects from their own life.

While viewing the arrangement, the light on the side table turns off, darkening the space. The lamp has been programmed to turn on and off at three-minute intervals, creating an eerie sense of both presence and absence. Who is turning off the light? Are they coming back? The only light now is the gallery light directed at the back of the chair, enticing the viewer to investigate.

As the viewer rounds the back of the installation, the darkened edge of the chair becomes visible. This detail is striking against the cream-colored upholstery. It encourages the viewer to explore further. It quickly becomes apparent that there is a gaping, burned void where the back used to be. Rough edges melted foam and charred wood contrast the stillness found at the front of this installation. Upon closer inspection, the viewer sees evidence of both plaid and floral fabrics beneath the white velvet. These layers of reupholstery represent the histories of this chair and of the family it belonged to.

There is constantly a question of authenticity as I fill the vacant spaces of this work with my own family history. Were we ever as genuine as we seemed to be in our family portraits? Whose fault was it that we were struggling emotionally? My brother? The divorce? Through this work, I recognized that my expectations of what a family should be were very different from my reality. These questions began to morph, where did

these expectations of family come from and why is everyone in my family expecting something different? As I grew older, I was able to see the disconnection between my parents was rooted in their difference in expectations of their lives. My mother's father had a nasty, undermining disposition behind closed doors, and this caused rifts in his family. My father's family had a very specific definition of what it meant to be successful in society and there was very little room for exploration or failure. These dynamics and trauma of both sets of my grandparents as well as their expectations for family and marriage influenced their children. My parents knew exactly what they did not want but were still left with a poor understanding not only of what it meant to be in a healthy relationship but what overall personal fulfillment means. These factors led to my parents' eventual divorce after sixteen years of marriage. This recycling of expectations and compensating for parental faults did not start with my parents, it goes back generations.

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These weighty expectations are ingrained within the furniture of *Inherited and Insidious*. The furniture is cheap, but they have designs and details associated with furniture of a higher quality, insinuating an effort to mask the true nature of the furniture. Similarly, the many layers of upholstery represent the attempt to cover and conceal damage or disarray. From the face, none of this is visible, but there is something subtly off-putting about the quality of light and the strange dust. It is only when the viewer looks at the back of the installation that these instincts are confirmed; the damage goes much deeper than the surface treatment. Can the chair still support the weight of the person who once occupied it?

In creating this piece, I found that blaming one or two individuals could not possibly account for all the roles and interconnections that led my family into conflicted circumstances. It reinforced my mother's wisdom that misguided expectations are what set people up to be disappointed. I realized that it did not benefit me to lay fault in my family because it would not break the cycles of anger and pain. My healing comes from embracing the past while still acknowledging the misguided expectations and trauma. These burdens must be cast aside to move toward empathy and away from resentment.

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The Seen and Unseen

"I didn't even know how bad it was until long after it was over."

Sight can be deceptive; seeing something and comprehending it are two different experiences. At the same time, what is not visible or apparent is just as important as what is. For example, some of the most common, non-visible health conditions can drastically change the physiology of a person or their shorten lifespan. Mental illness, untreated trauma, and extreme amounts of stress all have these side effects. Like empathy, these risk factors have definitions that are relative. In her 2014 TED talk titled "How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across A Lifetime", Nadine Burke Harris, the surgeon general of California, explains exactly what kinds of trauma result in what kinds of health effects:

"I am talking about threats so severe or pervasive that they literally get under our skin and change our physiology: things like abuse, neglect, divorce or growing up with a parent who struggles with mental illness or substance dependence."

I have focused my work primarily around these types of childhood and familial trauma because I have personal experience with what she calls "A.C.E.s" or adverse childhood experiences.¹ These types of life experiences are relatively common in the United States. 46.4% of adults will experience a mental illness during their lifetime², 50% of marriages end in divorce³, and 1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men experience some variant of domestic

¹ Harris, N.B. (2014, September) How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime [Video]. TED Conferences.

² Kapil, Rubina. "United States Mental Health Statistics." *Mental Health First Aid*, 6 Feb. 2019,

³ Kruk, Edward. "How Do We Tell the Kids About the Divorce?" *Psychology Today*

violence⁴. These statistics are unsettling and they are from years predating the novel coronavirus meaning that it is likely more and more Americans will be detrimentally affected by these types of experiences both short and long term.⁵ There has never been such an isolating global trauma but, it is concurrent with a growing awareness for mental health making this work feel so poignant.

As in many families, mental health was taken into consideration in recent generations of my family. There is a history of mental illness on both sides of my family, potentially in genomes that go back generations before proper diagnoses were even possible. My brother was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder in his twenties, long after we, as a family, had been experiencing the effects of his imbalance. There is no direct pharmaceutical treatment available to him, but there is a small amount of support for the child and the parents provided by school systems and family therapy. Part of that immediate family is commonly overlooked: the siblings are often left to decipher events on their own, unsupported. This is where my artistic investigation continues.

I wanted to understand not only my brother's condition and experience, but also the mental health factors that led to my parents' divorce. I felt as though I needed somewhere to place the blame in order to understand my experience as collateral damage in these tremulous relationships. This led to my brother and I having a complex relationship of both heartfelt care and deep-rooted resentment. As we grew older, I knew I wanted to work with him to repair our relationship. The first step was letting go of the traumas that were a direct result of my brother's actions. I began this journey by

⁴ "Marriage & Divorce; Adapted from the Encyclopedia of Psychology." Edited by Alan E Kazdin, *American Psychological Association*, American Psychological Association, 2000

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016). *About the CDC-Kaiser ACE study: Major findings*

revisiting one of the most prominent symbols of anger and aggression from my childhood: the fist-shaped hole in drywall.

It was common for these types of holes to appear after an argument had occurred within my family. My brother was not the only source. After my parents were divorced, there was a hole in the wall as a result of my father's frustration. It was several months before the hole was acknowledged, years before it was properly repaired and no longer visible. After my father moved out and into my second home, his frustrations eventually settled, but holes continued to appear with my brother's outbursts and exist in their various states within both houses. It would be some time before anyone could muster the time and energy to deal with such an upsetting symbol of unrest.

In the making of *Bad Patch*, I remembered a specific instance when a hole was punched in a wall where a family might typically display portraits. At the time, we often joked about just covering the injury with a photograph. In this video performance, typically shown as a to-scale projection, the camera focuses on the recreation of that instance of aggression next to a framed photograph of three young siblings. Their outfits and poses are curated in a preppy, country-club style but the smiles appear authentic. In the next frame, the camera focuses on the hole in the wall as a hand enters the frame and smooths away any loose debris. The hand returns to the frame with a spackle knife loaded with joint compound and begins to fill the void. The sound of the knife scraping across uneven surface breaks the silence as the outside edges are filled with the sloppy, greyish material. An outdated photograph of a young mother and father with their two young children is placed in the joint compound. The hand presses the loose photograph into the hole as messy, grey fingerprints stain the pristine print. The spackle knife reenters the

frame and slowly coats the photograph with a heavy layer of compound, shrouding the faces beneath. Another photograph is forced on top of the first, a candid picture of a smiling grandmother.

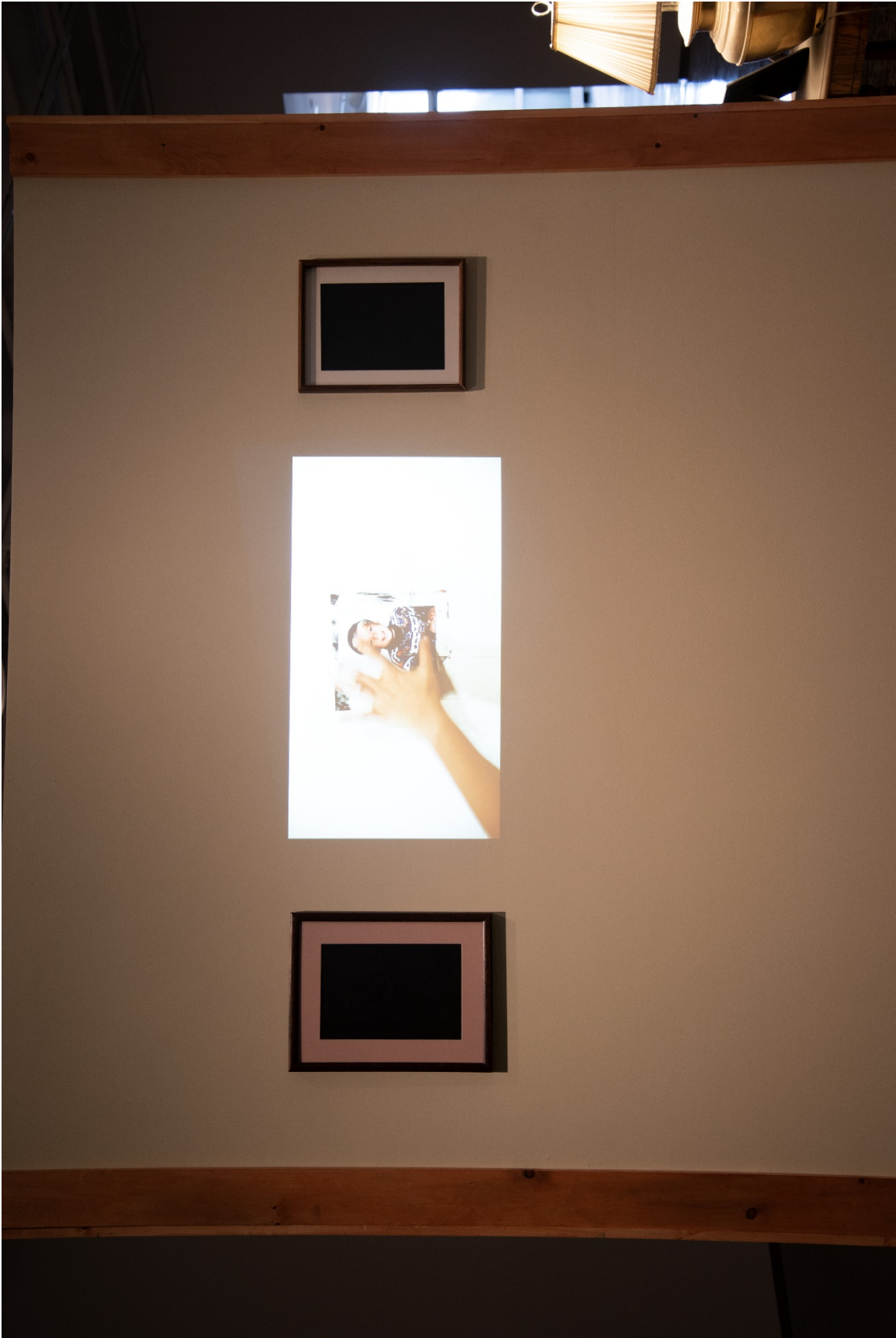
As the obstruction continues, the strokes of compound become more aggressive and urgent as photograph after photograph and each generation is piled on top of each other. Eventually, the cycle ends with metal mesh placed over the final photograph. This final layer mostly covers the images, but the wall bulges slightly, and the corners of photographs are still visible under the mesh texture. The camera pulls wide to include the original photograph of the three children hanging in stillness next to the poorly patched wall.

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That artifact of physical violence became an everyday aesthetic during my adolescence. Now, I contemplate how these types of visual symbols in a domestic space mentally and physically affect an individual over time. How can you begin to reconcile with a relationship filled with disruptive anger when the physical ramifications linger? I found I could not fault my brother because behavior like this is learned, in this case, passed from father to son. To that same end, I could not truly lay the fault at my father's feet because he too must have learned this behavior. To place blame would take more energy and thought than it was worth.

While not everyone has this specific experience of familial trauma, concepts of fault and blame have permeated most of my experience. When paired with the statistics of how detrimental mental illness is to overall health, the paradox of this work is a reminder that harboring resentment through blaming an individual is very different than holding someone accountable for their actions. The former strategy takes emotional energy and serves no one, while accountability paired with warmth and softness can potentially break the cycles of trauma instead of creating them.

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Preserved Memory

He imitated the evil robotic voice again:

“AH-HA AH-AH AH-HA!”

I giggled so hard my sides hurt and my eyes watered. We laughed so hard that day. I’m not even sure what it was we were laughing about. I think we had made up some story up involving a “Donkey Kong Country” Boss. We just kept doing the same imitation over and over. We laughed for almost an hour like that.

He finally caught his breath and offered me the Super Nintendo controller: “Okay, Okay. No, for real. It’s your turn now.”

We were snickering again by the time I started the level.

Nostalgia is just as complex as the relationships contained within a memory.

Throughout the previous works, nostalgia is carefully considered for its ability to turn the truth of a memory into something more innocent. I use the materiality of found objects to provide temporal and emotional context, thereby evoking nostalgic feelings. By combining those components with subversive metaphors, such as burying the nostalgic imagery in *Bad Patch* or the way a title is used as key information in *Inherited and Insidious*, I present nostalgia as deceptive but, it can also provide the foundation that preserves a relationship.

Start Again is an installation that sets a scene of two children playing a video game together. On approaching this installation, there is a glowing and colorful cave like form of blankets that draws the viewers’ attention. The cove has a three-foot arch opening on the side closest to the viewer. In approaching this opening, the viewer can crouch and peer underneath the blankets to see two tubes of light constructed from soft, white neon. Both figurative lines of light are about the size and outline of children sitting cross-legged. Almost like a planar cross-section, the neon becomes a single line that leads from one foot, up the leg, around the body and down to the other foot. The tubes raise where the knees would be and rest where the child’s mass would meet the earth. Because the tubes hover just

above the ground, these forms possess an ethereal quality. Beneath the neon, resting on a white comforter, are sheets of frosted glass that provide a grounded weight to the children's spirit-like presence. The light from the neon fills these glass “seats” and conjures the warmth of a body occupying the space.



From the three-foot opening, it is clear that this is a blanket fort and that the children in this memory are comfortable in their constructed space. Still viewing from this crouched position, the viewer sees a small tube television placed on the floor just beyond the seated figures. The tv is on and connected to a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), a chunky video game console from the 1990s that used cartridges to play different games. The familiar, cool glow of the animated screen is being cast into the blanket fort and the sound of repetitive, digital music leaks from its speakers.

A level of “Donkey Kong Country” is being played on the screen. The two controllers lay in front of the childlike neon forms, their connecting wires unraveling toward the console. Within the game, the two characters tradeoff who is in control and

when one gets knocked out of the game, it is up to the remaining player to revive them. The viewer watches as the two work through the level together. Ultimately, the pair of characters reaches the end of the level. The level selection screen pops back up and instead of moving on, the players return to the first level to start again. They play the beginning level again and this time they fail. They start the same level again and they succeed. This cycle of failing and succeeding, together, is the most active part of an otherwise stagnant curation of objects.

The viewer can walk around the sides of this installation and look at it from the front, where there is a five-foot opening to the fort. The whole scene is framed by a tufted, tan carpet like one that might be found in the finished basement of a home. The edges appear to have been cut right out of the floor, imbuing the whole arrangement with the sense that it has been removed from time and space to exist here as a preserved memory. The entire experience of the work is light, colorful and the accompanying sound is upbeat making it clear that this is a fond memory. Everything within this installation could be found in contemporary life, which allows it to exist in a timeless space. The nostalgia produced by the video game provides context that roots the installation in a time when I was a child, connecting the work back to my personal experiences. Yet, the ambiguous forms and aesthetics allow the viewer to fill this space with their own memories in the same way that the empty picture frames and candy dish allow for the viewer's personal projection in *Inherited and Insidious*.

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This memory is protected and preserved by the blanket fort, the way that children protect their own space and imagination when creating their own world. This is because I often come back to this memory as an anchor in my relationship with my brother, both good and bad. Growing up, my siblings and I would almost always play video games together or even just watch each other play. These games have been the one thing we always bonded over, and they have become a consistent part of all three of our lives. I think this has less to do with the games being fun and more to do with them functioning as a safe, positive memory that we can always come back to.

The games became an intermediary; something that allowed us not to focus on each other and the difficulties in our relationship, but also fostered positive experiences between us. Any time that my brother and I are at odds, I try to recall these experiences. They are who I know him to be and how we have been in the past despite all the trials we have faced. I hold on to these types of memories as the basis for my empathy and forgiveness towards him. In this way, nostalgia functions as something that creates a foundation. This use of memory can prolong relationships and provide patience to those who have trouble remembering why connection is so important.

Even within *Start Again*, nostalgia is a romanticized memory however, there are aspects that I use to create authenticity. On the screen, Donkey Kong and his smaller counterpart, Diddy Kong, repeatedly succeed and fail at reaching the end of the first level in the game. Even when the players succeed, the level map appears, leading them to the second level, but they always turn back to replay level one. This is representative of my attempt to reset, or start over, when my brother and I have an unpleasant altercation. I must restart the process of forgiveness and empathy whenever we argue. Emotions

surrounding around trauma are more complex and do not allow one to simply “forgive and forget” especially when one of the parties is not ready to move on. Efforts to heal a damaged relationship can feel futile, even more so in those involving trauma. Returning to nostalgia can certainly make this process easier, but you will not progress unless both parties are prepared to move on.

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Cycles

"I want one of you to have this house when I die."

My mother says this often. To outsiders, the house may look new, 25 years of fixing and changing and covering up old wounds but, we are so familiar with every inch, our eyes see through all the superficial changes like an x-ray over fractured bones.

"We don't want it. Too much has happened."

When I think about the idea of inheriting my childhood home, I can picture all of the negative energy buried in the walls like the photographs I buried in my video performance. Even now, these compounded emotions and energy feel present for me. The presence of this type of energy in space makes reconciliation and connection feel impossible like an infection that will not allow a wound to heal. I make these artworks to clear these emotions away. I externalize them so that I may reflect on them and bring the audience in to reflect with me.

Most of the strain that exists for me within my past is rooted in my relationship with my brother. Because of the effect his mental state had on both himself and our already-struggling family, we both harbor negative emotions toward each other that prevent us from having the healthy, nourishing connection that we both need. At the same time, he is the reason I wanted to make this work. I wanted to be able to leave our past behind and connect with who he is now. To this day, I am angry about our history, but I make this artwork so that one day, I may not be.

Within my installation, *I'm Sorry You Feel (In) That Way*, these invisible, nuanced emotions are made audible and visible. The physical representation for this experience is simple yet imposing, a four-walled structure stands independent of the room it is surrounded by. Like the interior of a home has been turned inside out and placed in a gallery, the walls of the eight-foot cube are manila-colored with a wood trim on the corners and baseboards. The viewer soon realizes that there are no doors or windows to this enclosed space, no entrance or exit. The words "I'm sorry you feel that way" are written in script at the center of the wall that confronts the viewer. The words are the same color as the manila paint and have a subtle, raised texture, as if

the words were delicately molded onto the walls. This makes them difficult to see at first, almost subversively subliminal. It is the word's lack of definition that draws the viewer closer to reveal the main aspect of this work.

There are two gallery seats placed by the enclosed room near this text enticing the viewer to sit down. Once seated, a muffled voice emerges from the inside the room, as if listening through a shared wall with a neighbor or family member. The voice is distorted by the architecture, but the fluctuating volume and tone make the emotions clear, a mixture of frustration and exasperation. Few words can be made out, most of the sound is turned into vibrations by the walls that contain it. There are moments where the speech quickens and others with long, pregnant pauses. There is only one person speaking, but it is unclear if they are the only person present in the conversation. The voice becomes more agitated the longer one stays to listen, until the emotions run their highest and loudest, after which the speaker begins to settle. This ending does not sound like an overall resolution, but rather like a question left this space unanswered. As the viewer, there is no graceful exit available; no way to politely interrupt the speaker to inform them of the unintentional intrusion of their privacy. The viewer has two choices: stay and attempt to interpret and empathize with the difficult emotions leaking from the seams or walk away from the confrontation all together, having not involved themselves in someone else's turmoil.

Hearing arguments from other rooms was a frequent occurrence in my childhood home. I would ask myself if I should get involved and try to mediate arguments, but often, I ended up paralyzed by such a difficult choice. As we grew older, my brother understandably became more defensive as he was continually labeled "difficult" or "obstinate." This self-fulfilling prophecy, perpetuated by the adults in his life, made it hard to communicate with him because he was easily upset. The family now knows unregulated emotions are a symptom of Borderline Personality Disorder, but at the time, the only advice my parents could really offer to my sister and I was to avoid him. If an argument did break out between us, they would turn on us as the ones at fault:

“Why did you engage with him? You know how he is.” Imagine repeatedly hearing this accusation which inherently branded my brother a hazard to be avoided. Combine this experience with concurrently experiencing his scorn. Overall, these circumstances led to strained relationships and left everyone involved feeling quite isolated; our lines of communication completely shattered.

In one of the few psychological studies performed on those who were siblings to an individual with a mental illness⁶, adult participants were questioned about their adolescent experiences and emotions within their family. This study emphasized how common it is for those with mental illness to be misdiagnosed or remain undiagnosed until their late teens or early 20s and how this affects sibling relationships. The most striking statistic for me, one that I identified with, was that during childhood almost all of the participants would have labeled their struggling sibling as “bad”, “dangerous”, or “damaged”.⁷ These assumptions were based on the treatment of the child affected by the mental illness. The actions of surrounding adults, not just the parents but teachers, coaches, grandparents, etc. affected the way the struggling child perceived themselves and others. Most of the subjects from the study recall feeling more empathy toward their affected sibling after a diagnosis was made later in life.

When my brother was diagnosed, I found this approach nonsensical; a diagnosis did not erase the past. However, it makes sense considering that those with a family member who has a mental illness are two to six times more likely to have anxiety or depression based on both environmental and hereditary factors⁸. These siblings begin to find the common ground of unmanageable emotion and begin to experience empathy. In recent years, my own experiences with anxiety and depression have allowed me to

⁶ Sin, Jacqueline, et al. “Siblings of Individuals with Severe Mental Illness.”

⁷ Sin et al., 219

⁸ Sin et al., 219

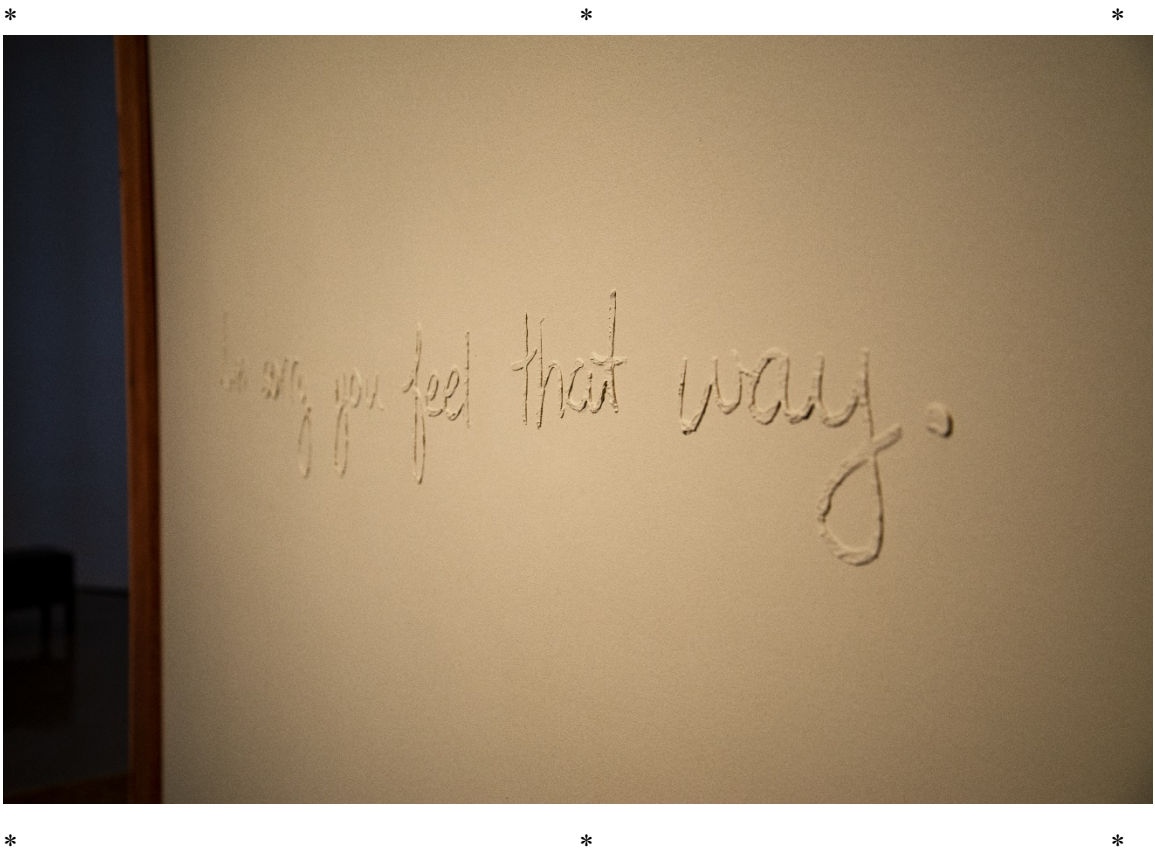
understand uncontrollable emotions and empathize with what my brother must have been experiencing as we were growing up.

I'm Sorry You Feel (in) That Way is a representation of the sibling experience from my perspective. During 2020, I had planned to have a completely vulnerable and honest conversation with my brother in order to better our relationship, but circumstances changed for everyone when the pandemic hit. The audio coming from inside of the room are my own words spoken as if I were having that open dialogue with him, one that would consist of many conflicting emotions. Despite not being able to have this conversation with him directly, I gained a lot of clarity from this experience. Through reflecting on my own expectations and emotions surrounding our relationship, I was able to uncover my own deep-rooted care for his wellbeing. In this way, I instill my emotions and energy in space to reflect on them. Through this work, emotions are both captured and released. While words unsaid have festered inside the walls of my childhood home, the words and emotions released in *I'm Sorry You Feel (in) That Way* are cathartic, like writing a letter to a loved one you never planned to send.

By representing both versions of trapped emotion, I capture both my previous and current approaches to difficult relationships. The words inscribed on the wall are confirmation of this. "I'm sorry you feel that way" is often used as a cold, sympathetic response where the speaker acknowledges pain without fully empathizing and connecting. When interpreted through the lens of someone with emotionally divergent experiences, like B.P.D. or anxiety, the statement brings about an empathetic response that acknowledges both pain and the inability to control one's own response, almost as if

saying “I’m sorry you feel *in* that way”. The handwritten nature of the words confirms them as an empathetic response.

I give my viewer the same opportunity by offering my own vulnerability and emotions. It is their decision whether to invest the time and energy necessary to empathize with my experience or walk away, choosing to preserve their own state of being. There is not a right or wrong reaction in this case, just a difficult decision that activates the viewers’ own agency when confronted with an emotional situation.



Trauma is holding onto the negative emotions associated with history and reliving them without acknowledging or realizing them. Letting go and forgiveness involve empathy, but the capacity to have empathy can fluctuate. Both trauma and empathy cycles overlap and intertwine with one another, resulting in a messy, unpredictable, and

imperfect process. It is also entirely unique to each individual. My experience will never be entirely comparable to someone else's circumstances, that was not the purpose of this work. It is important enough to reiterate that the making of this work has been helpful for me in my own emotional journey. The work is now available to help someone else in a similar way, but from a different perspective.

For the viewer, my work is about using examples of trauma to reflect on their own conflicts. I outline how history can repeat itself if it is not acknowledged and managed with tenderness and empathy. This is demonstrated through the cyclic nature of each of the works within my show. The most discernable example of cycles is the *Bad Patch* video performance looping for the duration of the show. The video ends with the remnants of spackle and photographs filling the once empty, fist-sized hole only to start back from the beginning where the same hole appears. This reinforces the idea of burying emotional and relational issues rather than healing them. This is similar to the lamp in *Inherited and Insidious*. It turns on and off at regular intervals, indicating ingrained expectations being present in the back of the mind. Some days the light is on and the ghosts of previous generations haunt us. Other days, we have the fortitude to work against their misguided lessons; the light is off.

I'm Sorry You Feel (in) That Way has a similar cyclic quality because the emotional labor I placed in this work is a spectrum of frustration, anger, sadness, softness, and love. Forgiveness and resolve do not all happen at once nor do they always remain. They are a practice that require patience and empathy that eventually make it easier to let go of transgressions and flaws. I am trying to understand the circumstances outside myself, in spite of the frustration and anger I feel. This work is a way for me to

process my own emotions so that when the time is right and our lives align, my brother and I can reconnect. With *Start Again*, the practice of finding clarity and stability is represented in the repetition of the first level. Each attempt to start over is a metaphorical attempt to find a solid foundation for a renewed connection. Returning to a safe, nostalgic memory is a reminder of what is possible.

The arrangement of the show around one central point creates a larger cycle of reflecting on trauma. The viewer can continue to move around the space and immerse themselves in my histories, which is how trauma perpetuates itself in the first place. By reliving the past, one can become trapped in their own memories and making it difficult to escape those emotions. The sound from *I'm Sorry You Feel (in) That Way* permeates the rest of the work in the way that underlying trauma infiltrates all aspects of daily life. Only by addressing convoluted memories and trauma do we find empathy within complex relationships. The works could stand alone, but when seen together, they become an entangled web symbolizing the nuances of healing from trauma.

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I'm sorry you feel that way.

Buried / Encased / Embedded / Imbued / Immersed

“Back then, I was just getting through it. To unpack all of that now...I'm not even sure where to start or even if I want to. Makes me anxious just thinking about it. Sometimes, things are better off left alone.”

I didn't respond, a sadness welling in my heart. I wish I had said I disagree. There's still time. Maybe one day I will.

The collection of this work in a single exhibition emphasizes the relationships between each individual piece. The enclosed room of *I'm Sorry You Feel (in) That Way* becomes the backdrop for the rest of the work creating a singular, comprehensive installation. The elements that separate each piece within the show are the methods used to confront traumatic events from my past. The works each have their own action associated with trauma; buried, encased, embedded, imbued, immersed.

I'm Sorry You Feel (in) That Way sets the stage for each of these works to play out. After addressing the content warning and selecting a bruise from *Transparency*, the viewer enters a larger gallery space to their right. The darkened periphery of this space focuses the viewers' attention on the central arrangement of the show, *I'm Sorry You Feel (in) That Way*. Two gallery seats wait to give them a closer view of the handwriting in joint compound and listen (or not) to the audio. The whole structure is angled slightly to the right, encouraging the viewer to walk around the left side where *Inherited and Insidious* waits in stillness. To get closer to this installation, which is backed into the furthest corner of the rug, the viewer must walk around the dimly lit and dust-covered space. As the left side of the chair comes into view, so does the darkened edge. It is not clear how pervasive this damage is until the viewer rounds the corner and sees the burnt-out cavity where the back once was.

After inspecting the layers of damage, the sound of scraping spackle brings the viewer back to their journey. *Bad Patch* is projected at life scale, between two empty picture frames. These picture frames reference the empty frames in *Inherited and Insidious*, once again encouraging the viewer to mentally fill the emptiness with their own family photos. The final

work in the show, *Start Again*, is positioned with the television set closest to the wall and the smaller opening of the blanket fort pointed towards the viewer. From this standpoint, they can hear the sound of “Donkey Kong Country” faintly as it merges with the voice coming from inside the walls.

The energy surrounding *Start Again* is remarkably different in comparison with the rest of the works. The handmade quality and vague details of this work separate it from the others, yet it remains connected through the common backdrop of *I’m Sorry you Feel (in) That Way*. This work is evidently more light-hearted and intimate than the rest. The blanket cove serves as a protective covering for the neon forms and the voyeuristic positioning of the viewer indicates that this is someone else’s cherished memory. Again, the viewer can fill these nondescript forms with their individual memories and immerse themselves in their own nostalgia.

The combination of this piece with the rest adds to the complexity of emotion within the overall show. This idea of cherishing nostalgia is at odds with the scrutinizing approach felt in the two previous works. The sounds of arguing in the background transform this work into a safe haven from all of the issues being addressed. This moment of connection and play between children becomes even more cherished in this cared-for space. It provides a place to come back to in difficult moments.

These works are connected by this underlying theme: the ways in which people cope with trauma. Trauma can exist within space, begrudgingly held on to as done in *I’m Sorry You Feel (in) That Way*. We can attempt to cover it up or ignore it, as acted in *Bad Patch*, only for it to burn right through the façade as it did in *Inherited and Insidious*. We can acknowledge it and begin our journey of healing while finding rest in kinder, softer spaces, like *Start Again*, and we can carry validation of trauma like the bruises from *Transparency*.

The whole experience of the show begins and ends with *Transparency*, an acknowledgement of trauma from one person to another. The mementos express my gratitude for the energy and time taken to be with this work. They serve as a reminder to be kind to yourself

and others; to acknowledge one another as human beings just trying to figure it out. The reason this work requires a content warning is precisely because it is common to be unprepared when confronted with trauma and emotional work. In this show, I provide a set of tools and visualizations so that the viewer may be better equipped to deal with past and future difficulties. It is their decision whether or not they use these tools to transform generational, familial, and emotional trauma cycles into patterns of healing.

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Non-Endings: A Letter of Love

Dear You,

You're doing just fine.

I know you may not be ready.

Let it be gentle.

I know this will take time.

It doesn't have to happen all at once.

You are never alone.

Love,

K

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank...

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