

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

frayed

Simone Ferguson

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Under the Supervision of:

Chair: Professor Sarah Blood

Committee Members:

Professor Brett Hunter

Professor Katarina Reising



frayed

/frād/

adjective

(of a fabric, rope, or cord) unraveled or worn at the edge.

"the frayed collar of her old coat"

- (of a person's nerves or temper) showing the effects of strain.
"an effort to soothe frayed nerves"

Tip Similar-sounding words

frayed is sometimes confused with **fraid**

Table of Contents

Note to the viewer.....	4
Acknowledgments.....	5
Artist Statement.....	6
3/7/2020.....	7
Introduction.....	9
Process.....	10
Materiality.....	15
Time.....	23
Conclusion.....	27
Works Cited.....	28
Image List.....	29

Note to the viewer

This show deals with adult content and may be disturbing to some viewers due to charged imagery and context. If you or a loved one is suffering from addiction or mental health issues, please seek help. Below are some free, confidential, 24/7 hotlines.

Al-Anon and Ala-teen hotline line: 800-356-9996 – Counselors provide support to teens and adults who are negatively impacted by alcohol addiction and provide resources to group therapy nearby for ongoing support.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): 1-800-662-4357 – English/Spanish speaking counselors provide referrals to treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based services.

National Suicide Prevention: 1-800-273-8255 – Support to help those in crisis process their emotional distress and prevent suicide.

Boys Town: 1-800-448-3000 – Over 140 languages can be translated; they also provide a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) line for the speech and hearing impaired (1-800-448-1833).

Drugfree.org: call 855-378-4373 or text 55753 – Counselors provide support and education and guide you to the best course of action.

Acknowledgments

Land Acknowledgement

I must first acknowledge the land in which these experiences and works happened. These works are inspired by experiences and life lived on traditional Munsee Lenape land presently known as Wayne, NJ. The requirements for this thesis and degree were carried out on indigenous Seneca and Susquehannock land, presently known as Alfred, NY. I acknowledge and am grateful for the opportunity to live on these lands that have histories of their own. Colonialism is a current and ongoing issue in our culture, and we must continue to build mindfulness and appreciation for the lands, and people who have tended to them for generations.

Personal Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family for being so supportive through this process and trying to understand my work through the art jargon and nonsensical FaceTime calls. I love you all.

I would like to congratulate Bella on her sobriety and strength this past year - I know I don't say it enough but I love you.

I would like to thank my senior advisors Sarah Blood, Brett Hunter, and Katarina Riesing for pushing me to develop my artwork and inspire me to keep making. Without your mentorship and advice, I would not have been successful in digging deep to produce this body of work.

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Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank Gumbo for teaching me patience, unconditional love, and slowing down to appreciate the small things in life.

Artist Statement

Through an examination of complex family dynamics, my work explores personal experience through the lens of materiality. Memories of fluorescent lights, difficult conversations, and crumpled paper are portrayed through installations and performances. These pieces depict emotions such as guilt, helplessness, and empathy, highlighting the complex nature of unconditional love for a person who struggles with sobriety and mental illness.

Time-intensive processes and delicate materials like silk, handmade paper, and performance allow me to explore complicated relationships while acting as metaphors for familial love. Unspoken words on handmade paper and bleached silk begin to paint the picture of these relationships' cyclical nature. I incorporate artifacts from my home as lived-in personal possessions. These act as stand-ins for family members while drawing attention to their absence, and loss of warmth the objects once held. The resulting installations demonstrate tensions, both materially and emotionally. These works speak of a familial specificity, yet in doing so address the universal experience of physical and emotional weight within relationships.

3/7/2020

The date had been set. Mom and I were going to be driving to visit my sister at the state hospital. We stopped to grab some coloring books, crayons, and Mad Lib books for her on the way. The drive there was filled with anticipation - stories from while I was at school were replaying in my head. The seizure, the car accidents, the rage episodes, and the pivotal police call leading to this in-patient program. We made light conversation to pass the time, but finally, we arrived.

After we completed the paperwork and were cleared to visit, our personal belongings were stripped from us and placed into plastic bags, stuffed into lockers. Shoelaces, sweatshirt strings, phones, keys, headphones all tangled together. When I first saw her, it was shocking. She was swimming in her clothing and clunky shoes. The lack of laces or drawstrings was making everything so much bigger; she looked small. Her hair was bright orange, I was told she had bleached it right before things took a turn. As she walked up to our table, I had no idea what to talk about. I wanted to address why we were here and what had happened, but even with all of my hurt, I didn't want her to relive any of her trauma.

We decided to play Go Fish to ease the tension. She was excited about her gifts - it would give her something else to do in her free time. We talked about her roommate, and what she had for lunch. We talked about how she was able to go on a walk as it was starting to warm up outside. We talked about how she was doing and how she seemed much better. She slid a small paper crane across the fold-out table and explained how a friend was teaching her origami. She

said this was the first one she had managed to do on her own and wanted me to have it. I kept it out in front of me on the table, to admire the care, and perseverance, and beauty of it.

As our visit was winding down, Mom decided to push a bit and talk about life outside of inpatient care. She let her know that while we were proud of her recovery this shit wouldn't fly on the outside. She told her that outpatient classes were needed to stay at home. The mood shift was like a switch had been flipped. She didn't yell; she didn't want her stay to increase by a week, but her face said it all. She took the crane from in front of me and crumbled it, dropping it to the floor. She took her gifts, stood up, and walked out. The visit was over. After she left, I picked the crane up and placed it in my pocket. We were ushered out of the building and thanked for visiting.

I collected my items from the plastic bag and sped out of the facility wiping tears from my face.

The drive home was silent.

Introduction

While the body of work depicted in *frayed* draws visually and conceptually on this singular experience, it is influenced widely by many smaller moments from my life leading up to this. Family dynamics are complicated and often encompass many emotions and feelings. Reflecting on these memories is painful due to caring deeply.

Art making has let me begin to heal from these traumatic experiences by examining the difference between anger and accountability and allowing me to show care and love towards my sister in ways I otherwise would not feel comfortable doing. Due to her diagnosis with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), having candid conversations about my feelings is not feasible. These installations and performances have given me ways to communicate without words and finally feel heard.

I draw inspiration from artists that work with material and emotion like Doris Salcedo, Felix Gonzalez Torres, and Josef Beuys. With their influence, I have developed a visual language to talk about guilt, regret, and love. Materiality, time, and the importance of play help depict these complex emotions while creating tension within the work. I portray this emotional entanglement by using materials that are time-intensive and laborious, emanating a sense of care. The contexts of these individual works are defined by time, material poetics, and how each one informs the next.

Process

Since discovering sculpture, the dynamism of it has always intrigued me most. The coordination and focus required by glass and sculpture engaged my whole being. I first explored the physicality of material as a conceptual component with my performance *Unravel*. Not only was this my first formal investigation of the material process, where the making and unmaking were performative but this was also my first instance utilizing textiles as an art material.



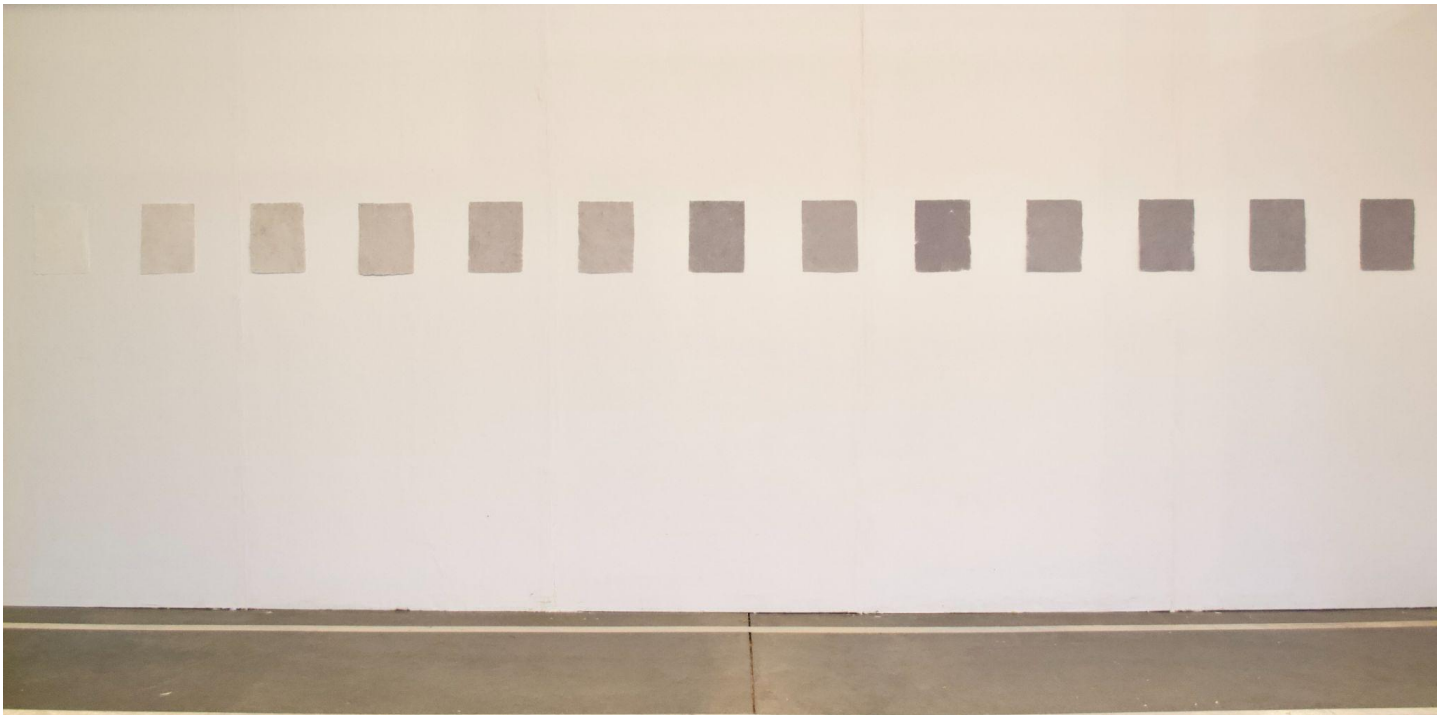
Unravel, 2019

This performance began as an investigation into craft processes. To learn to crochet, you have to unravel a lot of chains and stitches to start over. Throughout the process of making, and with the help of my mother, this piece functioned as a shedding of a second skin. The fleshy yarn was stitched into a comforting sweater then steadily ripped apart after its creation. While the garment is unraveled, the same amount of yarn accumulates at my feet. Even though the fibers degrade in the process of being unknotted and restitched, they remain resilient enough to be reused. This cycle is indicative of a lifetime.

Our upbringing influences so much of our lives, and everyone has different growth patterns and reasons for change. My relationships influence my work, which in turn influences my understanding of trauma and healing. This piece continues to encourage my interest in material life cycles. In the same way, papermaking is labor-intensive; it requires both physical fortitude and lightness of touch of the maker. While learning this process, I was drawn to its need for precision and ability to activate my whole being. For this body of work, paper was first used to simulate the paper crane my sister made me and then crushed. The labor and care that goes into creating handmade paper mirror the practice and thoughtfulness that went into making the crane.

I started thinking about papermaking as an opportunity to have conversations with my sister that I am unable to have. We have lost the ability to communicate without misunderstandings. I cannot have simple conversations with her like talking about our favorite music, or that really good meal we ate, let alone about how her actions and words make me feel. These unspoken conversations become ways for me to reflect on these experiences and my

healing process: I can be heard. Through the reflection that takes place in my work, the cyclical nature of our relationships and how it mirrors the material life cycle of paper. Ignoring phone calls for protection, feeling guilty for a lack of communication, beginning the reconciliation process alone, becoming too comfortable, and predictably getting hurt again. These experiences parallel the papermaking process: torn apart, blended to a pulp, meticulously pulled, extruded by hand, and dried flat. Once the pages are dried, I can write my one-sided conversation and repeat.



With Love (again and again and again), 2021

With Love (again and again and again) depicts the results of this cyclical process. The viewer enters the gallery and sees a row of letter-sized pieces of handmade paper, ranging from white to dark grey. They are lined up on the wall with eight and a half inches in between each sheet. Each piece of paper varies in the density of paper pulp, and saturation of ink from the letters written before. As the pages progress across the wall, each one features more degradation than the last: the edges are thinned and fuzzy. Towards the end on the far right of the installation, the pages reach their saturation point. The darkest page is an accumulation of all of the writing, so dense the letter cannot be read but the time and residue of ink and labor are visible.

While I continuously try to put effort into rebuilding my relationship with my sister, a lot of the effort is one-sided. More often than not, it is easier to leave things where they are instead of risking stepping backward with no communication. While I would like to say more, we have reached our limit for right now. This project has allowed me to sort through feelings of anger and blame, and come to a place of acceptance by pouring out stories and feelings I know will never be read.

This sustained process has become a temporary catharsis in my life and artistic practice. The opposing forces of aggression and care in writing letters and making paper result in the saturation of ink in the work. Paper is used as a prop for performance, the presence and absence of the body can be felt as each sheet has been carefully folded and written on, then torn and pulped. Similar to the repetitive papermaking process, the letter-writing was also rhythmic. Two times a week, I would collect my letters and turn them to pulp and then paper again. After drying

for a day, I would take them home and write. Words sitting on my chest can finally be let out.
These remnants are returned to pulp, starting the process over again.



Detail, *With Love (again and again and again)*, 2021

Materiality

When working with personal topics like family, drawing on the objects and the actions of home help to further inform the artworks. They are stand-ins for the human body but visualize the absence felt.

In my work, *All Consuming* the viewer is confronted by a mound of empty pills filling my sister's scuffed pair of Fila Disruptor sneakers. The shoes have had their laces removed, and are overflowing with pills. While there is no physical body present, the absence speaks loudly and demands attention. Emotionally charged objects like my sister's shoes, their missing shoelaces, and empty gelatin pill capsules to allow the viewer to enter my memory. These sneakers anthropomorphize the absent body and show the consumption and accumulation of pills. The emptiness of these capsules references their value to the family surrounding an addict; it's the thing that replaced the person they once knew. Simultaneously, these pills glimmer with a gold sheen which insinuates their priority in life to their taker. This piece allows for multiple viewpoints to be seen in tandem. When seen alongside *Visitation* the sneakers and pills have a conversation similar to a distorted family portrait.

Visitation consists of transparent resealable bags labeled 'VISITOR'. They offer a clear view of the confiscated keys, headphones, and belts. These items have been stripped and sealed away, pinned to the wall for the viewer's inspection. While these items are typically neutral and used every day, this installation charges them as potential objects of harm. Listening to music and keeping up your pants become actions with serious ramifications.

Upon entering a state hospital, rehabilitation center, or even correctional facility, these items are taken away, removing risk, and your sense of agency. The confiscation of these items struck me with more empathy in that situation. While it is jarring to step into the difficult family situation of someone else, it is a shared experience and allows the viewer to project their own baggage. The handwritten text on the bags and anonymous belongings allows the viewer to reflect on what they are carrying and envision themselves in this position.



All Consuming, 2020



Visitation, 2020

In another edition of family portraiture, I investigate this idea of the value of uninvited stains further through both additive and subtractive processes. In my work *Stains: A Family Portrait*, three stained tablecloths are stretched onto wooden frames and hang on the wall. The far-left frame is the densest and was created by my parents and siblings at their dining room table in Wayne, New Jersey. Through chance, my family recorded their meals and time together at the table with the creation of this piece over two weeks. The tablecloth in the middle shows two fainter stains and was the product of two weeks in my apartment in Alfred, NY. On the far right, my sister's tablecloth is stretched onto its frame. Though the same amount of time, chance varied piece by piece. While the works are different, they have moments of cohesion and fit together as a family. What would typically be bleached or thrown away due to their extensive staining are given value through the framing and hanging in the gallery.

In her book Radical Decadence, Julia Skelly writes that stained garments of clothing speak to “a moment of domestic failure” (3). These accidents or moments of failure hold that memory for the life of the fabric and in the form of memory. I first began my exploration with stain making in a craft-based studio learning natural dye processes. In that environment, stains are encouraged, and celebrated. However, in everyday life, a stain is something that is not invited. It acts as a signifier of memory, speaking to a past event.



Stains: A family portrait, 2021

In comparison, *I Surrender (even bleach can't cleanse this)* focuses on subtractive staining. The viewer is confronted with work more intimate in scale: a thin piece of habotai silk fluttering in the breeze about three feet from the floor. Upon closer inspection, the cool white silk begins to turn yellow and lose its shine. Holes form and the bottom edge is completely frayed. Strands of silk unravel, and the fibers are completely disintegrated. While it looks burnt, or even sprayed with some sort of dye, this discoloration and damage was the result of a bleach bath. Due to its chemical composition, bleach destroys animal fibers like silk in a way that it does not affect plant fibers like cotton. While the placement and movement of the work resemble the body, it also ties visually to white flags of surrender. In relation to the other works in my exhibition, this piece acts as a moment of reflection, and defeat. Subtractive staining is a more deliberate and destructive process than additive stains. While relationships are up and down, learning to accept what they are is the only thing you can do. Trying to force my relationship with my sister to be healthy will not fix it, in the same way, that using excessive bleaching will not create a blank slate.



I Surrender (even bleach can't cleanse this), 2021

As much as I have tried to remove the stain, or wash it out, it persists. Over time and these removal attempts, the material also disintegrates. The time involved in both the accumulation and reduction of these marks is seen in their visual appearance. By embracing the potential for failure through art-making, processes such as additive and subtractive staining, and writing and tearing heartfelt letters, a balance between intention and narrative emerges.



Detail, *I Surrender (even bleach can't cleanse this)*, 2021

Time

Another recurring theme in my work is time - not only the duration of live performances and material processes but also how long the viewer spends with a piece. As Mieke Bal states in Of What One Cannot Speak regarding Doris Salcedo's *Unland* sculptures, "the duration of the work's making becomes a significant element... the phrase 'labor of love' has never been more applicable" (134). These temporal moments in my work allow time for myself to reflect and therefore time for the viewer as well. Acts of care and intention are noticed only when the viewer slows down and spends time with my performances and installations. The longer duration of my performances indicates the endurance required of the performer and the viewer.

Inspired by the vat dyeing process, the performance *Burdens* seeks to visualize the feelings of guilt and helplessness within the surrounding family members of someone struggling with mental illness or addiction. Stress is often thought of as an invisible weight everyone deals with. Some feel it in their shoulders, while others feel it in their stomach. This performance aims to visualize these physical manifestations of emotional burdens and confront the viewer with someone in distress. The viewer is confined with a tired, cold performer, physically bearing the weight of a soaked floor-length woolen coat. This weight is intense for the wearer to bear for hours on end, and is equally intense for the viewer, unsure how to help.





Detail, *Burdens*, 2020

While this feeling and weight persist in my own life, the performer bears this weight for the duration of the performance. Slight nuances begin to become visible: hunched shoulders, shifting of weight to alleviate achy joints, shivering due to the temperature. After the performance is over, the residue is seen long after in the gallery as the water dries, leaving a history of these burdens carried when loved ones are suffering.

While *Burdens* focuses on the time of the performer and the viewer, all of the works in this exhibition have temporal elements. The physical process of making the work and tedious attention to detail requires patience on my end and the viewers. Additionally, the emotional labor and time spent trying to understand another human being (blood-related or not) is put into this work adding even more value to time.



Installation View, *frayed*, 2021

Conclusion

This exhibition acts as a physical culmination of the work I put in to heal from trauma, my attempt to rebuild my relationship with my sister. While some moments like *All Consuming* and *Visitation* are about holding her accountable for her actions and their consequences for me, installations like *With Love (again and again and again)* focus on me working through my emotions. Throughout this past year walking on eggshells after my sister came home, I realized she may never be ready and willing to talk. As upsetting as that was for me to acknowledge, I realized that existing within this cycle of abuse and manipulation was far worse.

Art acts as a way to communicate without words, and evoke an emotion from the audience. These installations and performances have allowed me to say what I have needed to say, and let others reflect on their relationships. While I may not be able to talk to my sister about these projects or let her know the damage she has caused me, this work has opened the door for healing to continue.

The journey towards closure and total acceptance is ongoing, this show is only a small step towards healing. In presenting this work, I hope others can think about their actions: how they treat others, and how they respond to others treating them. While progress is never linear, seeking to escape from negative cycles is a step in the right direction. Hopefully, people will leave this show with an agency to speak their truths and try to meet people where they are at.

Works Cited

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Image List

Unravel

2019

Yarn, Mother's hands, time, performer

Duration variable

With Love (again and again and again)

2021

Handmade paper, accumulated unsent letters

8.5 x 11 inches of 12

All Consuming

2020

My Sister's sneakers, empty pill capsules

Dimensions variable

Visitation

2020

Resealable plastic bags, confiscated personal items

16 x 19 inches each of 3

I Surrender (even bleach can't cleanse this)

2021

Bleach on habotai silk

16 x 24 inches

Stains: A family portrait

2021

Stains on cotton tablecloth, family, time

48 x 48 inches each of 3

Burdens

2020

Woolen coat, water, time, performer

Duration variable

Photo credit: Ethan Samaha