

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

TransDermal

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Signature line

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transdermal trans·der·mal (trāns-dûr'məl, trānz-)

adj.

1. Through or by way of the skin.
2. To cross, to cross the skin barrier, to cross the barrier between two bodies, to cross between one skin, one body and another, to become another body, to change, to cross over the outer layer into deeper meaning.
3. To cross the barriers between you and I, to combine ourselves into something more, to reveal that we were the same the whole time, if only for an instant.
4. To cross in between a liminal space, a space of becoming.
5. Expressing on a micro and macro level the desire to communicate across and between bodies

Prologue

Warmth and compassion found, the iridescent shine

Of your lovers sleeping face in the morning sun

Filtered into bars of light by the blinds

Motes of dust float in the air.

Knowing that this is perfect, that right now, everything is good.

This moment needs to be stretched out forever.

You are loved, and you love in return.

Of course, the moment doesn't last, time moves on.

She wakes, she moves on.

Pan right

Slow push in

Door closes

Fade to white

FADE IN: *TransDermal*

The conceptual and material basis for my work is centered around creating uncanny, liminal spaces where the viewer encounters a situation where they are encouraged to question some part of their reality. Skin, touch and memory are also key concepts explored in this exhibition. Memory can be the layering of experience, of creating and changing your own skin. Touch can be color, desire can be embodied.

The title *TransDermal* operates on several levels in the context of the show. It serves as both of the title of the exhibition and the title of an interactive video installation. The figurative series *Smash Cut*, *Rack Focus*, and the interactive soft sculpture *Transgressive Inversion* round out the cast members. This exhibition layers meaning through the multiple interpretations of the titles, the interactions with, and between, the viewers, and interactions between member works.

Our minds crave stories, crave narratives that reinforce social connections that we can focus on that we can feel connections to others through. How do we do recreate this in a generalized sense? How do we make these narrative connections through objects? Through implications of materials, joining them together, placing two or more materials in the same context. Film editing techniques take advantage of the mental phenomenon where viewers derive more meaning from the interaction of two sequential shots than just a single shot by itself. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

We as people form narrative connections subconsciously whether we intend to or not. By guiding these connections, new narrative meanings can be suggested in such a manner that the viewer comes up with their own stories. In this way, sculpture differentiates itself from film while still using similar techniques, as the viewer determines the time of interaction in sculpture. These feelings that are generated by the phenomenological response to sculpture are real and are very close to, if not indistinguishable from responses to actual circumstance. In film this is referred to as being “transported” into the movie or being “sutured” into the film.

The language of cinema and cinematography is a useful construct to me. Movies are the idealization and perfection of memories mixed with the intentionality of expression. It’s a way of understanding expression in a complementary way to the usual art jargon, and a way of looking at the theatricality of art. Artists and viewers both know that what they are making, and experiencing are constructed narratives, but through a cinema like suturing and immersion, people still form connections to the narratives. Trying to find the signal in the noise is a part of humanity.

In this exhibition, there are two series of works that take on greater meaning through their interaction. *Smash Cut*, *Rack Focus* acts as a visual metonymic device, a substitution for the whole that describes and encapsulates an experience, digested and re-expressed in physical form and material metaphor. It is the past embodied nostalgic scene. *TransDerma*, the video

installation, is a physical intervention in the present that invites the viewer to share in the liminal transition of the ephemeral now with its shifting and changing, perhaps a reinterpretation of the viewer's own image.

These repeated moments, constructed and re-lived, over and over, these are the visions of sculpture I have in my memories. These occasions that I want to share, reveal some underlying truth, some flash of connection between myself and other people who become the viewers of the work. An instant, a kiss, extreme close up, rack focus, back lit, right before the moment of contact when the sparks fly.

HARD CUT: *Smash Cut, Rack Focus*

Viewing the series *Smash Cut, Rack Focus* as representations of past memories, past scenes of nostalgia, momentos consisting of parts, they serve as reminders of past events. Members of the series have titles such as *Slow Push In, Zolly Dissolve* and *Tilt Up, Creep Out*. They are Moments that I am trying to recapture, to reformulate in physical space so I can hold onto them. In some ways, movies have acted as an emotional prosthesis to supplement the missing social interactions in my life, that have come about as a result of circumstance or my own inability to keep, create, or maintain interpersonal relationships. In the moments in between the opening and closing credits, the laughs, the tensions, the excitements, are real.

Like most people, I keep collections of knick-knacks and keepsakes that to anyone else looks like a box of junk. Each item takes me back to a specific time and place, they relate to a specific person and event in my life, and I won't get rid of them no matter how much time has passed and how many times I've moved. No one else has the proper context to form the connections that I have to these objects, and I don't expect anyone else to either. I still have stories and narratives that I wish to share for my own selfishly cathartic reasons. So I hide these meanings of mine in plain sight, not necessarily for you the viewer to decode, but for you to make your own connections, thereby drawing my navel-gazing past into the present and into your future, enabling a new connection indirectly between you (the viewer) and I (the maker).

Without the knowledge of cinematic editing language, the words Smash, Cut, Rack and Focus take on an aggressive, brutal tone. Slow Push In becomes sensual. If and when the connection to cinema is made, these become instructions. A smash cut is an editing technique where seemingly disparate scenes are cut together without transition. To rack the focus is to change the focal point of the shot; to bring one thing out of focus and put another into focus. Within the context of the show, the implied action to the dermis to the skin is contrasted by the longing of the work.

These cinematic instructions prime the viewer to the voyeuristic meta-narrative of the act of viewing sculpture. Smash Cut, look from one series of work to the next, *TransDermal*. Their local proximity to each other generates meaning in and of itself. The past nostalgia of *Smash Cut*, *Rack Focus* to the current ephemeral newness of *TransDermal*. This metanarrative services to take you out of the normal experience of the gallery and re-suture you into the situation with an added knowledge that you are an active participant in the situation and not a removed observer.

Standing sine waves, standing in three dimensions in phase with each other, out of phase with each other. The outward expression of the wave like form stretches as an appendage would. They exist in pairs, standing nose on the floor instead of side to side. Dipping into each other in pairs. Closer examination reveals translucent pigmented layers of urethane plastic that have built up on each other to form a skin which is textured and matte of the outside, but appears

slick and wet on the inside. This skin is simultaneously interior and exterior.

Colors are sumptuous interactions of violet, pink and orange that flow in and out of each other revealing the story of its making through accretion.

These micro actions, these small scale interactions of are blown up beyond actual life-size, to human scale to human size and take on figurative form of their own. Pools of vibrant paint stretch in between the figurative forms running off the lower edge, mixing in the created tidal estuary. Returning oscillations vibrate across space varying intensity and frequency, colliding, interfering, combining.

There is a specific moment, a memory that I'm trying to express, but I don't expect it to come across though, and I don't think it is particularly necessary for it to either. I share it here to show that there is indeed depth below the surface, it's just obscured out of your direct view.

Sine waves connect to the universal, not the universal collective conscious, but the universe itself. So much of our reality take place in the form of sine waves, from the motion of electrons and protons, to ocean waves, to light waves, to sound waves. In fact, any sinusoidal wave (think of sound waves such as a song) can be described through an addition of simple sine waves. The physics conundrum known as particle wave duality, where famously light can behave as either a wave or a particle depending on how you measure it, actually extends to all forms of matter including you and I when you look at the smallest of scales.

The case of *Smash Cut, Rack Focus* operates on many different scales, and dependant on the scale being considered, offers different metaphors. The literal scale of the work is based on myself, my own body. The amplitude of the wave is my arm length, the number of waves and wavelength being described is based on my height, and the width of the three dimensional form is my width. It is the small made large

If we shift scale to that of the electron, *Smash Cut* describes two things that can never actually touch. Electrons all have the same charge, negative, and they repel each other, so atoms never come in contact with one another in the same way that people can never really know each other due to the limitations of language and experience. Even electrons are made up of excitations in quantum fields which take the form of sine waves. We are ripples in this all encompassing, never ending, pond that we move through and are made up of. This is the closest approximation of that that I can give, these two sine waves coming in and out of each other that are both entering and being entered by each other, right before their moment of interaction, of communication. And this analog, this representation, this metaphor for sex and touch, and for myself, this being both and neither at the same time, touching and not touching, being and not being, male and female all at the same time that we perceive as being solid is anything but.

These forms describe that moment before combination. They move in and out of each other describe touch and desire, and a very specific desire at that.

Entering and being entered simultaneously, *Smash Cut, Rack Focus* is abstracted sex, specifically lesbian sex, in an abstracted form. Touch and desire made manifest. These conflicting and self-argumentative metaphors echo my own oscillation between the existential despair of the meaninglessness of existence, and hopeful optimism where we act as independent agents determining our own meaning.

PAN LEFT: *TransDerma1* (interactive video installation)

A curious happens when a video camera is pointed at a screen or projector that is displaying the same camera's live feed. Feedback happens. Beautiful space bending, color warping feedback that stretches back through the recent now, disjointing the past few seconds is created because of the lag introduced by technological intervention. It is quite similar to an infinity box created when two mirrors face each other reflecting each others reflection. If a person stands in view of the camera, their image gets projected back onto themselves, over and over. A simple wave of the hand becomes an event that ripples fluidly over the next few seconds, heightening your, the viewer's, awareness of the simplest action.

That is the simple case of one camera, one projector, where your image is repeated onto you, but what happens when you introduce more cameras and

more projectors? When one camera is pointed to the screen of a different projector in a similar camera/projector configuration, and that other camera is pointed to the first camera's output, a continuous feedback loop is formed on both screens. This means that you can see your own image projected not just onto yourself, but also on whatever, or whoever is in front of the other screen. (This is also scalable up to how many every camera/projector pair that you wish to daisy chain together.) Your image, your skin, including your movements, become entwined with the other person's in real time, and you both can see it. The self and the other become one. I see myself as expanding a moment of self reflection, and sharing it with everyone who chooses to participate.

This feedback happens in real time, without any specialized software manipulating the image in the way a Snapchat filter putting bunny ears on you would. This is significant as it does away with specialized coding knowledge, and represents something that is repeatable and achievable to anyone with the will to do so. This is no gimmick, just a special use case that has been there the whole time, and will be there after this particular installation comes down.

It is just such a camera setup that *TransDermal* begins with. Located in the foyer of the Fosdick-Nelson Gallery are four such camera projector pairs that fill the space with shifting and overlapping projected resonances of the viewers as they enter the exhibition space. Some of these pairs are directed downward from a higher vantage point, while others confront the viewer head on. Colored gels tint the gallery lighting in the area creating a surreal immersive experience.

On the floor, and encroaching on the walls are strips of tape used on film sets and in theatre alike to mark where actors are to move to within a scene. These marks can take multiple forms such as a simple T shape, or parallel strips of tape in a __ __ form.

Normally each actor gets their own color of tape and these marks are as unobtrusive as possible to remain unseen by the camera or audience. But unlike a stage, the tape markings in *TransDermal* are overlapping and confusing. Some areas are so densely packed with directions that no meaning can be derived; obliterating the grey of the concrete gallery floor and the white of the walls with color. These marks are picked up by the cameras and projected back into the space adding to the concophany causing the viewer to further question what is real in the space. This is all to mimic the messiness of life where no script exists to give clear direction, and there are multiple paths available to traverse the same life path.

Instead of the idealized past, *TransDermal* presents a messy present, just as real life is messy; there are no beginnings or ends. There are no stories outside of our own minds. The concept of the story is a useful construct for us. It has structure, a narrative, and more important, meaning associated with it. I am using math and physics as a metaphor to make sense and impose a sense of order on the seeming chaos of life.

TILT DOWN: Transgressive Liminal Spaces

An artist's biography is not always relevant to the understanding of their work, but in my case it is. I was not raised female, I was raised male. I was born biologically, depending on how you look at it, male. Growing up I was very much raised to be a boy. But from a young age, I came to realize that is not who I am, that I do not feel comfortable operating in that mode. Quite simply put, I am a liminal space, my body is a liminal space, my life is a liminal space.

I had to construct my own outward expressions of self through a careful piecing together what my socialization would have been like had I been born and raised female. I've had to, or rather had the opportunity to pick and choose what aspects of femininity and masculinity that I want to express. This process of choosing is something that every person has to do everyday, and my case is an exaggerated version of this process that exposes how much of what we think of as ourselves is chosen in this way. The me that I have become are bits and pieces of both gender experiences. I exist in this perpetual threshold between what are often thought of as exclusive states of being. Because I have had the opportunity to see both sides of the fence as it were, my body and my life is this liminal space of both and neither at the same time.

How does this relate to my work? The work that I make is an expression of my own self, my own body, my own life. They are attempts for me to process those realities, and to express in situations and objects what I can't always say with words. A good example in my own work is *Transgressive Inversion*, which

manifests as six interactive grid-like stuffed textile sculptures. Initially mounted on the wall, they are meant to be taken down by the viewer and played with. Each *Inversion* is a three by three grid of tube-like reversible appendages that can be turned inside out. Overall they each form a twenty inch cube. Fabric choices range from simple cotton, to faux fur, to satin, while colors are bright and saturated. These are the colors and fabrics that I was too afraid to reach for, but now revel in.

I am going to talk about these because they are not only objects that are liminal in that are both phallic and yonic, but because they are interactive, they gets the viewer to directly engage with, and create a liminal space. Each section of the grid is both phallus and vagina, and they transition between both. They always bring a smile to people's faces when they see them or interact with them. They are a repeated motif with comically exaggerated proportions and colors that are simultaneously disarming and engaging.

Their meaning is hidden in the abstraction, and in allowing them to be interactive, I'm inviting viewers to not only participate and find out what exactly a liminal space is, but to find joy in it and to find the quirky humor in the space in between. These are some serious topics, and humor is an important tool in breaking down barriers, especially when it comes from a place of vulnerability.

When someone approaches these *Inversions*, they are not always aware of what they are, but they are usually drawn to them because of either their comical proportions or bright colors. They may get it right away, or maybe later,

but I don't think that it is really necessary for them to have the full meaning behind them up front.

I often make jokes in my work that are just for me, such as my use of hot pink. Pink has a specific meaning for me, and not just pink, but obnoxious hot fluorescent pink. It is my reaction to a particular set of societal expectations placed on girls. It is my saying "You want pink? I'll give you pink!". Pink is obviously also an allegory for femininity, and also a construct that is projected on women as a means of suppression. A woman can only be soft and dainty, can only be less than a man, that she can never be strong, or at least as strong physically or emotionally, as a man. It's something that most women are trying to work past. But for me it is something that I was denied in my upbringing, to the point where it could mean outing myself if I expressed my true self in action or expression. I could potentially out myself, even now having transitioned years ago, with severe consequences. If I was outed in public, maybe I just get made fun of, if it's at work, maybe I lose my job, if it's at home, maybe I lose my family, or even my life. As a result, the importance of the expression of femininity became blown out of proportion for me. It took on meanings and connections that most women don't have for the stereotypical female gender expressions, which I'm using pink as shorthand for. I'm using it now in the exhibition *TransDermal* as a declaration. I am here, and I want you to see me for who I am. This statement is not just for me, but for all of us caught in the middle.

Interacting with these *Inversions* is taking pleasure in a transgressive act that I have had to work very hard for. This is something that has been the root of a lot of ups and downs. There is a lot of happiness and sadness around this act of going from male to female. I'm giving the viewer a way to enter this transformative space without all the associated baggage, and I think that is really powerful. It is important to highlight how much each of us is constructed in a negotiated space of needs, wants and expectations. This work is a metaphor for my own longing for contact with other people, my own outreaching yearning desire to to touch and be be touched, to be recognized by the other. Because of the of the limitations of life and our bodies, we're not able to share in ways that we would like, and this is an outward manifestation of that.

What is the role of the liminal space? None of us are static, we are changing each day. We all have these places within us, and I'm getting the viewer to interrogate that process within themselves. I'm taking something that was such an exciting, traumatic, wonderful, terrible experience for me, and simplifying it for them, leaving out the emotional weight and context of that, but just to give them the outward expression of that so they can have a little ah, ha moment within themselves. For me, I am processing through my own states of change, states of being, and feelings, but for everyone else it is more about them connecting with those parts of themselves that liminal places evoke.

FADE OUT

The works included in *TransDermal* are moments, fictionalized, simplified, synthesized, and distilled, that I need to share. Sometimes they are joy, sometimes they are sadness, sometimes they are both. I see them when I shut my eyes, when I drift off, before I wake up, and when I allow my mind to enter a meditative state. These moments that I see when I let go, they are the moments that I am trying to bring into reality to share. They mean something to me, so they might mean something to you too. These moments are half remembered and misinterpreted, but real nonetheless. They are not grand political statements, nor are they a series of tableaux. They are moments of connection, of love, of repulsion and disconnection. Sculpture to me is a form of storytelling, an imparting of information through formal relationships and material identities.

Part of the power of visual storytelling through movies is the temporal, contextual, worldbuilding where every scene builds on the previous, each imparting meaning alone, and in relation to every other scene. The temporality of movies differs from the apparent atemporality of static sculpture. But, I present a different, more phenomenologically, based, take on the act of viewing sculpture in the round that is helpful to viewing my work. I see the viewer as an active participant in their own experience. The gallery or museum is an artificial construct with, much like a movie, its own rules of engagement and expectations. A viewer creates their own narrative account of their experiences with the displayed art in the contrived space, they get sutured into the framework of the

space just as they would when they watch a movie. The viewer develops relationships with the works as they move through the space based on the order in which they view the work, the work in relation to their own body, a work's relationship to the space, and each work's relation to the displayed collection as a whole. As the viewer makes their way through the space patterns emerge, relations form, a narrative develops, and an emotional response.

If I could name and discuss the feelings that I am attempting to invoke, I wouldn't need to make a sculpture about it, I would write it down, or simply say it, not make a performance, or create an interactive experience, but I can't. This need to express what cannot easily be said or written exposes the fault lines of language and our inability to convey meaning with a hundred percent fidelity. Something is always lost in the translation from thought to sound to words to sound to thought. But in this space of lost information is the viewer's entry into the work. This is where they can insert themselves and their point of view into the narrative.



TransDermal, 2018, exhibition view



Smash Cut, Rack Focus, 2018, size varies, urethane plastic



Transgressive Inversion, 2018, size varies, fabric, stuffing



Transdermal, 2018, video installation