Intimate Exchanges

by

Bear Cooper

Master of Fine Arts – August 2023

The State University of New York at New Paltz
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research and Background</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual of Record</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassembling the Body</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devotional Figures</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallery Exhibition</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction/Abstract

*Intimate Exchanges* represents the culmination of a journey from embodied material investigation to devotional artmaking as a refuge for the body. This project has its origins in my research of phenomenology, ritual theory, and queer intimacy. The action of touch is central both to acts of intimacy as well as the field of phenomenology which promotes embodied perception. Some creative mediums have a greater intimacy of touch in the process of their making and for me, printmaking is one of those mediums. After a brief introduction to natural dyes, I was pulled in by their potential for embodied investigation and created a methodology to turn my body and its movements into the printing mechanism, further enhancing the embodiment of printmaking. Thinking of my body as a “ceremonial thing.... which must be treated with proper ritual care” provided the framework for me to elevate this material research to an intimate ritual of higher importance.¹ Through ritualizing moments of tactile exchange, I was able to explore embodiment and its use in artmaking.

Background Research

“It must be that the soul
Has some secret, sufficient way of knowing
That it is immortal, that its vast encompassing
Circle can take in all, can accomplish all.”

— Alastair Reid translation of Jorge Luis Borges

Humanity has a hidden way of knowing through our body (soul) that can be utilized through artmaking. We can know that the sun is out without ever seeing it with our eye, instead feeling the warmth on our skin. This way of knowing, alluded to in Borges’ poem, forms the foundation of the study in phenomenology. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one of the field’s originators, asserts perception as intentional and bodily. Central to his philosophy is the ‘embodied mind’ thesis which emphasizes the active and significant role the body plays in shaping features of cognition, such as memory and emotional response and regulation. The intellectual underpinnings of this philosophy arose in the early 1900s from Merleau-Ponty’s

---

concept of ‘embodied subjectivity,’ which he proposed as a response to Rene Descartes' disembodied view of the mind.³ Merleau-Ponty emphasizes perception as being both intentional and bodily. Psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, in reference to intimacy from the perspective of phenomenology, echoes the work of phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty saying that “touching provides not only closeness and connection… the contact between skins is what allows us to feel that we are separate and coherent within our own bodies.”⁴ If perception happens via the body, then we can begin to ask questions about how our bodily experiences relate to our creative processing. Is there a way to fully experience embodied sensation? How can artmaking be used to shift awareness from “the head to the heart and from the heart to the hand—that is, to the whole body.”⁵

To learn more about what embodiment is - on not just a theoretical level, but the physical experience - I looked toward professionals who work in embodiment every day. I attended a retreat with Japanese dance teacher and Social Presencing Theater founding collaborator Arawana Hayashi specifically focused on embodied practices. She started the retreat with a demonstration using a dry erase marker. When the cap was taken off the marker, it was like our mind separating from our body - floating away from the body and focusing on all our internal monologues. Through mindfulness, one can place the cap back on the marker, and place their mind back with their body. Finally, from such a simple explanation, I was able to understand the idea of embodiment being a state where your mind is fully present with your body. The retreat was spent doing a variety of exercises, learning “dances” that could be utilized for a daily

practice of mindfulness. The goal was to engage the body’s “physical and spatial intelligence” to uncover insights about ourselves and provoke “reflection and learning”. My experience with Arawana made tangible to me the belief of phenomenologists that perception is a “direct embodied involvement with the world.”

I then looked to another dancer, Trisha Brown, to learn how she engaged with embodied practice in her choreography. In creating her performance *Set and Reset* she frequently used what she called a “release technique”. Tensing various muscles and, instead of actively choosing how to progress, would instead allow her body to make the next move. Her body, rather than her mind, controlled how her dances progressed. She illustrated that “there is only one access point for how we as humans actively participate” in life – the now. By shifting awareness away from our mind and instead shifting that focus toward our body, we can lean into the current moment, and fully sense all its possibilities.

I wanted to use this new found understanding of embodiment to allow a more intimate type of material research, which brought me to natural dying. Unlike synthetic dyes, natural dyes do not automatically attach to fabric, and instead require an intermediary to coerce adhesion. This lends itself to the printmaking process where print acts, to me, as an indirect mark of an interaction with a substrate. Additionally, natural dyes also allow a level of intimacy in the

---

printing action that would be unachievable with synthetics that are not body safe. By using natural dyes, I would be able to embrace embodiment by utilizing my flesh as the print matrix.

A uniting principle within ritual theory is a control of attention, and as my goal was to heighten my attention on my body by using it as my printing tool, I looked to various scholars on how to delineate in my mind the embodiment from printmaking as a practice and the specific embodiment that would come from the natural dye printing sessions. In order to differentiate, I would need a ceremonial procedure to set body printing apart from my traditional printmaking. Some researchers of ritual theory express frustration in the ambiguity of what makes an action ritualized or not. For one scholar Catherine Bell, it comes down to the decision of the actor in determining the ritualization. That it is one’s way of acting that “specifically establishes a … contrast, differentiates itself as more important” than a more mundane action. In other words, it would be up to me to elevate these sessions to that of a higher importance. However, another voice in ritual theory, Douglas A. Marshall, proposed that all rituals are designed in a specific way to control the participants attention.

According to Marshall, the structured activity of ritual is built upon attentional focus, effortful action, and anomalous behavior. By his definition attentional focus can be directed using meditation, sensation, and interaction all of which will arise during a printing process that involves using my skin. Effortful action is attentive activity and anomalous behavior is anything out of the norm such as rhythmic movements, unusual sensations, and vigorous activity. Looking

---

10 Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 90.
toward Marshall’s model, and maintaining the strong intention that was mentioned necessary for Bell, I defined for myself the ritualized actions that would make up this project.
Ritual of Record

Fabric wrapped intimately around my body forms a second skin

marked with the imprint of the self – the result of ritual

embodiment. These ritualized actions force me to sit with the

painful sensations of a malfunctioning body and seek out relief.

The process of using natural dyes begins with a mordant, which is a metallic salt that facilitates the bonding of the dye compounds to the fiber.¹³ Through testing I determined that I would use potassium aluminum sulfate, colloquially known as alum, as my mordant. Unlike ferrous sulfate, which can interact with prepared fabric to immediately reveal a mark, alum remains clear throughout the entire printing process. Working with alum allows me to use this necessary intermediary without any awareness of the final result, to better immerse myself into the ritual embodiment rather than allowing myself to be distracted by composition of mark or other artistic manipulation. After thickening my mordant (an aqueous solution of alum) with guar gum, I had a clear gel that could be applied to my body and transferred to fabric.

¹³ The Maiwa Guide to Natural Dyes (Maiwa Handprints Ltd., 2021), 5.
Process documentation: (above) Applying mordant  (below) Transferring mordant from skin to fabric
For my first printing session, I set aside a low-lit enclosed space where I could start to work out my body printing ritual. The emptiness of this space allowed me the separation from the rest of the world necessary to begin a meditative focus. Rubbing the mordant gel across my body created unfamiliar sensations that drew my attention in and kept it focused on my body. Trying to keep both Brown and Arawana’s teachings in mind, I allowed my body to dictate where and how it interacted with the fabric. I would go back to the improvisational movements that arose from this first session and codify it in my ritual. Repeating similar movements in each subsequent body-printing session. Though, not yet made visible, the marks left by my close contact with the material would turn the fabric into a record of the “intimacy enacted at the surface of the skin.”

After connecting with the fabric, I rinsed and dyed it with various natural dyes such as madder, lac, and cutch to reveal the hidden marks left by my mordanted body. The fabric, reminiscent of flesh in its folds, softness, and malleability was now imprinted with an echo of my body. And while looking at this imprint, I was compelled to bring the fabric back to the body that touched it. By adding glue to the dyed fabric, I was able to recreate the presence of flesh wrapped around my body. With some areas heavily stiffened and others left free to drape, the sculptures in Encasing that which marks, trace a solid structure secretly hidden beneath the fabric. The presence of the body that was merely hinted at by the body prints dyed onto the fabric, is made more obvious. This left a physical token of the intimate exchange between my body and this textile.

As I moved through multiple sessions of ritualized embodiment, I settled deeper into my body and began to notice exactly how much of myself goes into this practice. It brought to the forefront of my mind a wide awareness of how much existing in this body hurts. I was forced, by the nature of this embodied methodology, to confront the pain and heavy emotional toll that chronic illness was having on me.

*Ritual of Record: Encasing that which marks* Inner Thighs

Alum body print on fabric, natural dyes, glue
Reassembling the Body

*I reassemble fragments from these rituals and tenderly wrap them in skin-like paper, a process to manifest a body without pain.*

My body connecting with the fabric wasn’t the only connection taking place in these ritualized actions. In reviewing my documentation footage, I saw that just as I was leaving an imprint on the fabric, my body was also leaving an impression on the wall. A shadow version of myself moved along the wall in an echo of the body moving along the fabric. Much like my compulsion to manifest the body prints into space, I wanted to give these impressions flickering across the wall solidity as well.

Without their attachment to the body, they are released versions of myself floating free. I wanted to bring these shades of myself back together, a conduit to rebuild a body with the same lightness and freedom from pain as the floating shadows. I formed steel into shapes that resemble the shadows being cast, and handmade sheets of abaca paper. Returning to my ritual action space, I dipped sheets into water to rehydrate and become pliable. Soft and delicate in this wet form, the paper requires more care in order to keep the sheets from tearing apart while wrapping
them around the forms. The steel ‘skeleton’ balanced on my leg and propped against cheek, while my hands gently draped the wet paper to form a skin. In this process of tenderly remaking myself, these fragments became yet another projection of my body.

In her poem *Snow Geese*, Mary Oliver being delighted to being touched with a lit match. While reading, her metaphor for this connection between touch and emotion immediately called to mind a line from *On Holding and Being Held*: “intimacy relies on boundaries both secure and permeable, on feelings both of containment and escape”. This dichotomy, that instead of pitting forces against each other, joins them as a way to experience something positive. However, while my rituals allowed me

---

15 Mary Oliver, “Snow Geese,” essay, in *Wild Geese: Selected Poems* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2004), “I held my breath as we do sometimes to stop time when something wonderful has touched us as with a match which is lit, and bright, but does not hurt in the common way, but delightfully, as if delight were the most serious thing you ever felt”.

security and a way to contain all my body’s feelings within the material, this embodiment was grounding me excessively in my discomfort. And I found myself craving such an escape.

“In some ways, I feel I must know somewhere in my body. Part of the process is trusting that.”

— Ann Hamilton

The confrontation with the somatic pain I experience that arose from these exhaustive embodied actions led to the contemplation of where my body is held safely. Where is my body allowed to experience those feelings of “escape” and release the feeling of pain? Where do I experience intimacy that while “being held together, allows one to safely come apart without fear of permanent and catastrophic dissolution?” Through the fabric and paper sculpture, I found that intimacy is indeed “enacted at the surface of the skin”, but I required space to step away from these pieces to actually find this relief. I needed space to allow my body to be passive in its embodiment, to “become unintegrated, to flounder, to be in a state in which there is no orientation, to be able to exist for a time without being either a reactor or... an active person” I

19 Julie Taylor, 321.
realized, when looking at my sketchbook, filled with scratchy drawings and collected fragments of text, that I was drawn to the bodies of others.
Devotional Figures

*I reexperience the memory of intimate touches through painting

and print – a meditation on the respite found in the bodies of

others.*

In the way that drawing records an intimate connection between my hand and the paper, I saw myself repeatedly using this connection to manifest other intimate connections with bodies that I love. I was finding peace both in these intimate moments as well as the attempt to preserve it. Both activities considered for their touching, proximity, and contact.²¹ Arawana taught that movement experience elicits genuine insights into our own behaviors. It provokes reflection and learning.²² And though, I felt pulled away from my original material research, I saw a potential in further exploration of embodiment. Was there a way to shift the focus of embodiment? I compared the way that my body was feeling during these body printing rituals to how my body

feels when held by those that I trust and saw that in intimate exchange I found relief.

Remembering moments with my partners was a way to reexperience the intimacy that brings relief from tension.

gazing down,
warmth pools in my bones,
with each contented sigh
that passes their lips

Stone lithograph on handmade recycled and abaca paper, chine-collé, oil monotype
A characteristic of positive ritual is the incorporation of rhythmic movements.\textsuperscript{23} And lithographic printmaking is a process that lends perfectly to this aspect of meditative ritual. Grinding down a stone by hand to prep its surface and moving a leather roller back and forth to ink the surface are swaying repetitive movements that form the foundation for printing lithography. With each stone, I pulled from my memory with this ritual dance, moments where my body felt peace. I sat with each image, reliving the ordinary spectacle of intimacy that compelled me to recapture it, to meditate on each precise moment with more depth. By directing my ritual embodiment toward a print matrix outside of myself, I found space to engage with intimate remembering.\textsuperscript{24}

But now

\begin{quote}
Draw in your head, alone and too tall here,
Your eyes already in the slant of drifting foam;
Your breath sealed by the ghosts I do not know:
Draw in your head and sleep the long way home.
\end{quote}

— \textit{Hart Crane}\textsuperscript{25}


Arabelle Sicardi mused in their newsletter “‘I’ve been thinking about all the ways I try to make people feel cared for... it requires attention, research commitment, even knowing you might fail at what you’re doing. It requires devotion.”²⁶ Their insight made me realize that these figurative works were a devotional object to an intimate moment and to a person. Devotional portraits have been long used as a vessel for piety and within this ritualized space, I found myself pulled into this tradition.²⁷ I moved from working one image on the stone for long period of time, toward painting directly onto papers on which I had printed some sort of background for short periods of time. Transitioning from this repetitive printmaking toward painting single unique images provided the opportunity to bring my attention to the plethora of moments in which I was seeking relief in these intimate moments and to create a devotional object for each one.

I request her support
She returns,
    heart held out in her hand

Stone lithograph on handmade recycled paper
With these devotional objects, I recreated the intimate exchange with another body through my intimate connection with each paper. Some are soaked, patted dry, pressed. (Handled tenderly, the way one mighty gently comb tangles from a loved one’s hair.) Each ink used to paint the body was mixed by hand. Dried pigments of the earth like iron oxide and Blue Ridge sienna were slowly worked into a mixture of honey, gum arabic, and clove oil. Fingers dipped in each one to test the proportions of the mixture. (Measured by heart, like favorite recipes cooked for another). Through this ritualized devotion I was able to venerate the extraordinary feeling of relief from bodily pain that these intimate moments bring.

Intimate feelings tend towards the vague, the slippery, the notional, even the spectral \(^2^8\) and they prove difficult to recapture. And though these queer intimacies I was meditating on served as place of respite from pain, they also demonstrate that the language of intimacy has to flirt with the language of eroticism or risk being unreadable as intimacy. \(^2^9\) Legs spread open wide are not just a depiction of sexual desire, they are also a safe harbor of relief. My body finds relief when it is between their legs. A multifaceted intimacy where “intense affective and physical connections cannot simply be reduced to signifiers of sexual desire.” \(^3^0\) Each print’s title speaks to the peace, the calm, and the devotion that I feel in these bodies.

In moving from the very physically embodied sculptural pieces to these two-dimensional figurative works, I am discovering through my expanded embodied printmaking practice, space


\(^3^0\) Julie Taylor, 312.
for myself to be safely held. *Intimate Exchanges* serves as a record of affectionate rituals with both my embodied self and those bodies of the ones that I love.

*first, with my hands*

*again, with my lips*

*and once more, with my pen*

Oil monotype and painting with handmade watercolors, tusche, lac
Gallery Exhibition
Print Documentation

warm
safe
held

by the deepest part of them

Oil monotype and painting with homemade watercolors
I go back to this moment
over and over,
again and again

Oil monotype and painting with homemade watercolors
A gift: to hold the whole length of her in my palm

Oil monotype and painting with homemade watercolors, chine-collé, lac
I want to make a home in their bones,
estilled close to their organs

Oil monotype and painting with homemade watercolors
Compelled to capture this moment
this body
this tenderness

Stone lithograph triptych, homemade abaca paper
Convergence.” Essay. In New Approaches to the Study of Religion. Volume 2, Textual,
Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches (Religion and Reason ; v. 43). De
Gruyter, n.d.

BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music). “Set and Reset: Trisha Brown’s Postmodern Masterpiece.”


Borges, Jorge Luis, Rodríguez Emir Monegal, and Alastair Reid. Borges, a reader: A selection

Casey, Sarah. “A Delicate Presence: The Queer Intimacy of Drawing.” TRACEY | journal
Presence (July 2016).

Dobrzynski, Judith H. “Representing America in a Language of Her Own.” The New York
Times, May 30, 1999. https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/30/arts/art-architecture-
representing-amERICA-in-a-language-of-her-own.html.

Gallagher, Shaun, and Dan Zahavi. The phenomenological mind. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge,
2021.


