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Up Shit Creek (Without a Paddle)

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# Table of contents

- Introduction and Definition of Trauma ......................................................... 3
- How Trauma Functions in the Mind ................................................................. 4-6
- How I've Implemented This Research ......................................................... 6-9
- Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 9-10
- Images ............................................................................................................... 11-20
- Bibliography ...................................................................................................... 21
Trauma holds a significant influence on an individual’s life as well as on their experiences within society. As a child I experienced trauma from within my family due to my mother and brother’s abuse as well as my father’s alcohol addiction. I am no stranger to traumatic experiences and am plagued by them daily. I am constantly asking: What exactly is trauma? How does it work within the mind and body? How can trauma be healed through art making? I am asking and answering these questions in my thesis body of work entitled “Up Shit Creek (Without a Paddle)”.

In the process, I am learning how, as an artist, I can use my work to heal myself from this trauma.

First, it is important to define trauma and what it is understood to be in these two fields. Traumatic Syndrome (also known as post-traumatic stress syndrome), was not recognized by the American Psychiatric Association until 1980.\(^1\) Since then, trauma has always had a very vague definition. Trauma is defined as “caused by a stressful occurrence that is outside the range of usual human experience and that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone”.\(^2\) This definition is vague because human experience is different for every individual and therefore there is no solid control group for the definition of trauma. What I find interesting about this definition is that it shows that trauma exists in a spectrum. It is overwhelming to consider the impact a single traumatic instance can have on an individual for potentially the rest of their life.

Traumatic instances that can have lasting impacts on the mind and body can occur at a very young age, much like my experience as a child. Peter Levine discusses in his book, *Walking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences*, how susceptible infants and children are to experiencing trauma because they lack the appropriate skills necessary to handle a threatening situation and are therefore more vulnerable to trauma. Levine notes that this could be as simple as an infant being unable to warm themselves in a cold room where an adult is able to get a blanket, turn up the thermostat, or rub their arms.\(^3\) This is important because it emphasizes that experienced trauma is valid regardless of how individuals perceive the severity of the situation that caused it. This research shows that childhood trauma is merely a result of being ill-equipped to handle certain situations and is in no way the child’s fault. This is an important lesson to learn to begin the process of healing.

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\(^3\) Frederick, Ann, and Levine, Peter A. *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences*. pg. 49.
Levine also introduces certain aspects in an individual’s life that could assist or prevent them from being traumatized. He defines these as external and internal resources. External resources are what an individual’s environment supplies as a form of safety, be it physical or emotional. Internal resources pertain to an individual’s sense of self that has been affected by various things such as their attitude, experiences, and whether their instinctual responses have been successful or not. This research is important because trauma is so frequently internalized and accepted as the victim’s fault. The forms of resources described here also provide situational examples that are directly linked to the trauma experienced by children which is essential to understanding how trauma occurs at such a young age. External and internal resources provided in infant and childhood development can impact the individual for quite some time.

Trauma can persist in the individual’s mind in the form of somatic memory for decades after the trauma has occurred. This memory deals with the arousal associated with certain sensory memories that are specific to what a person may have experienced during traumatic moments in their lives. These memories can be of sounds, images, touch, and sometimes taste. These triggered memories take the form of a sensory experience rather than a verbal experience that can be translated or explained to another individual. This makes it difficult for an individual to articulate their experience to others and they often repress their emotions and experiences instead of communicating them. These reactions to sensory stimuli place the individual in a traumatized state and prevent them from being able to function normally in their lives. Understanding somatic memory helps us see how the mind can retain this traumatic information.

In order to be able to fully understand how the somatic memory works, one must understand the limbic system and its relationship to storing traumatic memories. The amygdala is the area of the mind that retains the emotional meaning of memories. The hippocampus is the area of the brain that retains the cognitive timeline of the experience in the memory. The hippocampus works to retain the structure of an event with its beginning, middle, and end. When experiencing a traumatic event, there is rarely an end or a resolution to that event which prevents the hippocampus from being able to file it away as a past event. This causes the traumatic memory to reoccur in the mind as a present experience. Because the mind is unable to fully process the event, this

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4 Frederick, Ann, and Levine, Peter A. Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences. pgs. 50-52
explains why a traumatic event can persist to invade an individual’s life for decades after the event has occurred.

These two areas of the brain correlate to two different forms of memory that are heavily involved in trauma theory. These two forms of memory are explicit and implicit memory. Explicit memory refers to what we commonly understand memory as: the factual instances and lived experiences. Implicit memory deals with daily activities we do not need to recall how to do in order to do them, like riding a bike, tying our shoes, or reading. Traumatic memories exist within both of these forms of memory, but are more frequently seen in the implicit memory in the form of somatic memory and its automatic response to sensory stimuli. This concept of implicit and explicit memory is where materials and imagery involved in the creation of art works become a primary catalyst for a cathartic articulation of trauma that can lead to healing of that trauma.

When healing from trauma it is important to not only discuss how traumatic memory plays a role, but also how those memories are processed by the individual. Psychoanalyst Ruth Leys discusses in her book, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, that all theories regarding trauma deal with two conflicting ideas on how it is processed. These ideas are what Ley’s refers to as the mimetic and the anti-mimetic. The mimetic deals with theories that suggest the victims internalize their trauma which leads to the imitation of their aggressor’s behavior. This behavior causes a cycle of trauma that gets passed down through generations. The anti-mimetic is when the victim is separate from their abuser and they are able to distance themselves from the situation to not recreate it. Leys suggests that the anti-mimetic means of processing trauma makes it easier for individuals to heal from their experience because they are able to process past events outside of themselves with agency.

Psychotherapy works to help both of these individuals heal from their trauma and explains that it isn’t until these individuals begin to transform and integrate their sensory memories into physical works that they begin to heal from their experience. Because of this, works of art are the best form of therapy for trauma in that they require no speech. This means of healing calls for a form of the cathartic abreaction in the creation of a work to find healing. This means that the individual must, in some form, relive the traumatic experience in an expressive way that will consequently release a previously repressed memory and emotion associated with it. The areas of the brain that are

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7 Talwar, “Accessing Traumatic Memory through Art Making: An Art Therapy Trauma Protocol (ATTP).” pg. 24
9 Leys, Ruth. *Trauma a Genealogy*. pg. 15
impacted by traumatic events and work in different ways to process it, such as the amygdala, and the hippocampus are vital to this form of non-verbal therapy. When creating art, the individual’s brain is firing from all of these areas working from memory, explicit and implicit. Even if an individual isn’t completely aware of what they’ve created, it comes from a place stored within the mind in an attempt to heal itself.

This research into psychotherapy and trauma theory left me with an array of research questions that I have explored within my work in order to exorcise the trauma from my mind and body to begin the process of healing. As this work has relied so heavily upon my personal experience, it was important for me to acknowledge my history, its lasting impact on me today; to recall, transform, and heal. The way I have approached this is through the use of images from explicit memories that I can recall. I began working with my visual memories, physically altering their appearance. In somatically reliving these experiences through the process of making and unmaking, I could initiate a cathartic resolution for these traumatic instances and begin to, at the very least, make peace with the past.

I began this process by searching for my family through old family photos, which are tangible forms of memory. These were not all my memories, but they were my mother’s, my father’s, and my brother’s and so in turn, they are inherently mine. These memories are what made my family who they were to me and in trying to understand my past, I felt it was essential to try to understand theirs. I started by altering these photos in photoshop, erasing parts of the image, repeating parts of the image over the whole. I then had them printed with a digital loom onto blankets, a common household comfort item. After I received the printed blankets, I then pulled the strings out one by one to further erase the image until the most telling information was left like my brother’s hand, the thing that touched me, or my mother’s smile as a child, something different than what I have ever seen from her. The time it took to break down these queen-sized blankets was immense, but the action was soothing and the time allowed me to pause and reflect on who they were and how that impacted who they are to me now. What is left of my action is a tattered, small, useless blanket that shows the breakdown in the relationships I had with these individuals. The blanket has been rendered useless and ineffective, much like these old photographs as the people held within them no longer exist.

After working on the blankets, I started thinking about my internal explicit memories, the images I see in my mind when I think of my childhood. In the works, “Don’t Tell” and “Why Do You Want to Mutilate Yourself Like That?”, I started sketching some of these memories by stitching on sheer fabric to mimic how fuzzy and thin they are. The perspective and proportions are all off in these works. The light shining through the back
further distorts the image and this distortion reflects how my memories have shifted over time and are no longer clear and accurate. I also started to take other imagery from my childhood like the circle worn in my father’s jean pockets from a snuff can and distort them into something new. In the work, “Y’aint”, I made one of these pockets by inserting a chewing tobacco can into the pocket and then rubbing it with a file, sandpaper, and a wire brush to wear down the ring in the pocket. The wearing away of the ring in the pocket symbolizes my relationship with my father, his body degrading over time, and his role as my father. The process of wearing this whole into the denim was very similar to the process of pulling out the threads of the blanket for me.

I also used materials from my childhood like clothing made for me by family members, my dad’s old denim jackets that I’ve worn for years as an adult and chewing tobacco and beer cans (my father’s vices). I’m so interested in utilizing clothing items as they can say so much about a person and their internal monologue. The way people dress is how they present themselves and perceive themselves functioning in the world. I am interested in working through the personal relationships I have with these clothing items and what they say about me and my family that needs no verbal communication. Clothing is so loaded with information that every article of clothing comes with a set of memories for each person because we learn the connotations of clothing through what we’ve seen, read, or who we know personally. There’s a universal language in clothing that I feel is especially powerful in conveying memory, personal relationships, and individuals.

I started this process by creating a biker jacket fashioned out of my old clothes from my childhood. These clothes were what society deems as “feminine” in that they were mostly pink, had a lot of lace and frills, and also were mostly dresses. These clothes have always been a reminder to me of my shortcomings in the eyes of my family and I do not identify with that representation of myself. I titled this work “You Could Be So Pretty” to reflect the disappointment my mother felt and how she conveyed that to me. I wanted to take those articles of clothing and alter them into something that would fit my self expression as I see it today. After the jacket was constructed, I had every intention of dying it black to match the rest of my wardrobe, but I found myself more interested in another means of erasing the imagery on the fabric itself. I started using black thread to stitch over the entire jacket as the means of erasing the memories and the social standards associated with the imagery in the clothing. That process of repetitive stitch had me fully immersed in the action of erasure. I also feel the aggressive nature of the sewing machine puncturing the fabric into almost nothing underneath the stitch speaks more to the breakdown in memories and relationships over time as well.

I furthered this exploration of clothing in the work “I’ll Put You in a Headlock and Give
You a Tour of The Parking Lot”, by utilizing one of my father’s old jean jackets. I had taken two of these jackets from his closet when I moved out for college and I have worn them both to rags over that time. While wearing these jackets, I had always felt myself drawing more comparisons between my father and myself, wondering what he was like when he was my age wearing these jackets and how would we get along if we met as peers. Over time, those sorts of comparisons grew heavy on my heart and I felt I needed to get rid of these objects that were causing me to doubt myself. I made a plaster mold of one of these jackets and then I completely tore apart the jacket into a pulp and cast it back into the form of a jacket. I did this in order to render the jacket ineffective in providing warmth and unable to be put on. Much like the blanket pieces, I feel this mold of the jacket and the jacket cast itself also represent my relationship with my father. They are both representative of a comfort item, but neither of them functions as a comfort item. The mold is a cold, hard, plaster material and it holds the hollow of the jacket, like something is missing. The cast is rigid and paper-like as well as a little broken down in itself. This work helped me begin the process of removing items from my life that were actively harming me.

In the work “Doggone It!”, I decided to utilize that second jean jacket I had in my possession to fully rid myself of them. I was trying to think of what else I could do with it to render it useless but for it to still be representative of what it should be capable of doing, comforting. I decided to encase this jacket in cement. The cement reminds me of the garage floor at my dad’s house. He spends most of his life in that garage and I spent a lot of time sitting on the floor. How cold, rigid, and rough this jacket is now furthered my research into conveying my relationship with my family through these material alterations. The material of cement speaks volumes about my relationship with my father in that it’s hard, rough, and cold or burning depending on the condition it is in. Encasing this jacket in cement also served to be a literal burial of the grief it has caused me for so long now.

In the work “Emmaline”, I used the chewing tobacco in a cast wax mirror to make a blurry silhouette within the wax. The intense scent of the wintergreen flavor, the color, and the texture of the chewing tobacco enacts my implicit memories and takes me back to the overwhelming emotions that fraught my childhood. The mirror is the same shape as the mirror I had in my bedroom growing up and the silhouette reflects how I always felt looking into that mirror day after day, month after month, year after year. The making of this mirror has allowed me to get that feeling out and communicate it in this piece that I find so beautiful. It has allowed me to access this part of myself that feels repulsed by myself and I’ve started to work through those feelings. This work opened me up to starting to accept that those dark, damp, and repulsive feelings and memories
are what make me who I am and I have been able to build a life over those, one that I feel proud of at this very moment.

My thesis exhibition is sited in my cottage style house in Biloxi, Mississippi. Biloxi is right on the Gulf Coast where the Mississippi river flows out. I grew up in Marietta, Ohio which is right on the Ohio River which flows into the Mississippi River. I feel the geographic location of this exhibition is significant in reflecting the healing journey the work has taken me on. The exterior of the house itself is very broken down, which reflects what has been put into the works of art. The house has multiple different colors of siding on it and some siding is missing, exposing the wood beneath. The wood steps and porch are deteriorating. The visuals of this broken-down space are very fitting for the work in that it reflects the process of making the work, but I am also interested in the deeper connotations of installing in my living space. I am thinking of the house not as my home, but not as an exhibition space either. I am thinking of it as a representation of my mental space. I will be removing a lot of my typical living space items so it will be neither familiar or unfamiliar to me. The work will be installed in such a way that the pieces will be found where you would normally see them in a home. For example, the concrete jacket will be hanging in the closet, a blanket will be laid over the arm of the couch, and the wax mirror will be installed in the bathroom. The house will represent how I go about my daily life with these memories and experiences surrounding me.

It is my hope that those who experience these works are able to find some connection within themselves to the work, whether that is just from one small part of one of the works or from multiple works. Everyone experiences trauma in their lives and has complicated relationships with others and I think that this body of work can give pause for viewers to reflect on what healing may look like for themselves, whether they start from where I started, by making, or if they choose another path. I just hope to encourage more individuals beginning their process of healing. I also hope that the humor in the titles of the works shows that common denominator of how I feel a lot of people who have dealt with significant trauma as a child tend to cope with it. I feel the titles give a little bit of a necessary relief to the grief aired in the works and that directly reflects how I approach my life and interactions with others. I hope the viewer is able to pick up on that and appreciate that aspect as well. Lastly, I hope that the works convey the depth to my trauma, intergenerationally, regionally, and economically.

Through researching trauma theory and how it is used in psychotherapy I have been able to find a means of healing from my traumatic childhood through my art practice. The process of making my thesis body of work required me to relive and transform those memories. When I started this process, I was very intimidated by it, but the nature of the work and the process of making was so healing in itself that the work has become

Emily Brannan | “Up Shit Creek (Without a Paddle)” MFA Thesis pg. 9
joyful for me to make. By recreating my explicit and implicit memories, I was able to take these negative experiences and turn them into works of art and I feel that has been what has helped me heal. Through this process I have been able to come to terms with the realities of these situations: that I was just a kid and there was, and is, nothing I could have done, or could do now, to protect myself from what happened to me and that it’s not my fault that these things happened. I am grateful to be in a position where I can use making as a means of helping me work through these things because it has been beneficial for me and I look forward to furthering this healing moving forward in my work.
Touch
18"x72"x3"
digital loom print
Don’t Tell
10”x10”x1”
wood panel, voile, cotton thread
Why Do You Want To Mutilate Yourself Like That?
9"x12"x1"
childhood clothing, wood panel, cotton thread

Emily Brannan | “Up Shit Creek (Without a Paddle)” MFA Thesis pg. 13
Y'aunt
7"x5"x4"
Denim
You Could Be So Pretty
36”x30”x3”
fabric from childhood clothing, cotton fabric, cotton thread, cotton batting
I’ll Put You in a Headlock and Give You a Tour of the Parking Lot
36”x32”x1/2”
denim, PVA glue, steel buttons
I’ll Put You in a Headlock and Give You a Tour of the Parking Lot
36”x33”x3”
plaster
Doggone It!
24”x32”x6”
denim, steel, cement
Emmaline
24”x15”x1”
paraffin wax, Red Seal wintergreen fine cut
Installation Location, Biloxi, Mississippi
Bibliography


Emily Brannan | Artist Statement

I am exploring the use of art as a means of healing from childhood trauma that I experienced growing up as a lower middle-class girl in Appalachia. I use imagery from old family photos, visual, and sensory memory to recreate my distorted memories. I am working to find some sort of empathy for my family members who created these traumatic experiences for me growing up. Trauma theory explains that the individual needs to relive and revisit traumatic memories in order to heal from them and I am attempting that through reliving not only my experiences, but trying to reexamine others’ experiences and the intergenerational trauma that lead to the way I was raised.

The erasure of the images in all of my works whether it’s from digital manipulation, sheer fabric, simple line drawings, or thread pulling, is to allude to the breaking down of memories as well as the decay of relationships and people. I use traditional craft techniques such as weaving and sewing which are healing processes in themselves. They offer the time and repetitive action that calls for self-reflection. I tear at the works, pull out threads, and use bleach to destroy them while also mending other works through the use of stitch. This constant fluctuation between breaking down and pulling back together directly reflects the process of healing from trauma for me. These works are used as a means of confronting, processing, and healing.