MY BODY IS A TEMPLE

Bachelor Thesis
Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design
Department of Textiles
Spring 2019

BÁRA JÓNSDÓTTIR

Supervisor Patrik Söderstam
Essay supervisor Michell Zethson
External supervisors Åsa Cederqvist, Ulrika Mårtenson
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 3
BACKGROUND, THE INCIDENT 4-5
GAINING TRUST 6
CAN I HEAL MYSELF THROUGH CRAFT? 7
INSPIRATION 8
PROCESS 9
THE WORK 11
THE SOUND 12
CONCLUSION 12
THE AFTERMATH 13-14
REFERENCES 15
PICTURE COLLECTION 16-19
INTRODUCTION

The idea behind this project comes from fear, the fear of my own body. The trust has been broken between the mind and the body and I can’t count on it anymore. I thought I could rely on it, but it betrayed me and I’m afraid it might do it again.

The driving force behind the project is:
Creating a body of work that can create a sense of unity between my mind and body, as well as bring a sense of ease to myself when witnessing the work, and secondly, repairing the broken trust between the self and the body.
Which leads me to the research questions: Can I reconnect with my body? And, can craft be used to heal mental wounds?

I’ve set up guidelines to help guide me towards the answer. In this project I will attempt to form a body of work, which depicts both the trauma survived and the expedition towards trust. In order to do this, I will examine the concepts of trust and God since I believe that trusting in something I can’t see nor control (the inside of my body), is equivalent to religion. I will get familiar with the human anatomy and take inspiration from artists that use similar methods in their works as well as artist that have used both their physical and mental traumas as a recurring theme in their works.
On the 5th of June 2012 around 5 a.m. in a hotel room in Mexico, I found myself being somewhere in between the states of wake and sleep. My body felt strange and even if I tried my hardest I couldn’t find a comfortable position, even though I was sending all the right signals from the brain to my body.

When I came to my senses I realized that the right side of my body was completely paralyzed. I somehow managed to get up only to fall down on the floor. My classmates, whom I shared a room with, woke up from the noise and while one of them ran out to get a doctor the others helped me get back on the bed. A few minutes later the doctor arrived, he had the scariest eyes I’ve ever seen. They made his whole face look as if he had just seen a ghost. That of course made me think I had some deadly disease, probably a virus that was so dangerous and contagious that I would be dead in a few hours. I started crying before he even examined me, just from the look on his face. He called an ambulance and the paramedics came, put me on a bed and tied me to it. When they did that I was certain I was going to die.

We drove to the local hospital and a doctor named Jesus examined me. He looked at the CAT scan\(^1\) results and said that I needed an MRI\(^2\) so I was sent to the nearest city, Cancun. When we arrived in Cancun the first thing I saw when the paramedics opened the ambulance doors was a pickup truck with about 5 police officers sitting on top of it, all of them carrying AK 47’s\(^3\). Since I come from such protected environment where the police doesn’t even have access to guns, the first thing that popped into my mind was that I was going to be executed. What was happening to me was incurable and so extremely contagious that killing me was the only viable option for humanity. I was wrong, but my fear of only having a few hours left was substantiated when they rolled me into the ICU\(^4\) and the only patient there, besides me, was a woman that looked to be 120 years old and on the verge of death. She was so tiny and weak that if I hadn’t seen her head on the pillow I probably would have thought the bed was empty. From hearing her screaming with her extremely hoarse voice I drew the conclusion that she didn’t have much left, which had to mean that I didn’t have much left either.

I talked to at least five doctors that day and none of them gave me any answers about my condition, they just asked questions. Finally, the last doctor I spoke to told me that I wasn’t going to die. I started crying from relief. He told me that they weren’t sure what had happened and that he couldn’t tell me with absolute certainty that I was going to be able to walk again, but he was certain about me surviving this. When he left I was determined to walk again. If someone says something is impossible I become frustrated, find the person narrow minded and put my energy into finding a way to make it possible. He didn’t say that walking would be impossible for me, but he didn’t sound optimistic and therefore I started focusing all my energy on the big toe of my right foot. I tried and tried to move it for probably an hour and finally, it happened, I could bend it! Only a little bit at first but I didn’t stop there and at the end of the night I could bend it without even having to think about it.

The next morning I woke up to two young women, not much older than myself, giving me a sponge bath. It was humiliating. In an attempt to distract myself I tried focusing on moving my toe again, but failed. It’s so strange that when you are able to move your body you don’t even think about how you’re doing it, but when you can’t, you realize that you do it with your brain. I panicked and tried as hard as I could until I finally managed to move it again. God I was happy. My big toe was my proof of this only being temporary.

---

1. Computerized axial tomography scan
2. Magnetic resonance imaging
3. Assault rifle
4. Intensive care unit
The next morning I was able to move my fingers and by the evening I was able to move my whole arm. Not much, but I could move it. By the end of the week I was able to walk, with a walker of course, and was allowed to fly back home. Upon my arrival at the hospital in Reykjavík I learned I had a heart condition, atrial septal defect to be exact, which essentially means that I have a hole in my heart. And that hole had allowed a blood clot to run smoothly to my brain and cause a stroke.

I never really talked about this experience to anybody (a psychologist or someone of that sort that is), and I didn’t even realize that this had had an affect on me. But through time I’ve realized that I react differently to things since before the stroke. I was never the type of person that ran to the doctor every time something felt wrong or weird, but now I do. I may have the slightest stomach ache and I will go to the emergency room. If I could have a hole in my heart for almost 20 years without knowing about it, who’s to say there’s not some other horrible thing happening inside my body that I have no idea about?

I have a traitorous heart and thick blood and therefore I am afraid of my own body, I feel stuck inside it, and yet, I feel alienated from it. I am me, I am my brain, my fingers, legs, I am every part of my body, and yet, I have no control over what’s going on inside of it.

I think of it this way: We, that is, the people on earth, feel as if we have everything under control, but suddenly we hear news of a meteorite flying towards earth at a hundred thousand miles per hour and we realize that we don’t have power over anything. We just have to accept that everything will end soon and try and live our lives as best we can until it hits. Everyone knows in the back of their mind that a disaster could happen at anytime, but it doesn’t do anyone good worrying about a meteorite that might be on its way towards earth, we must try to live our lives in peace, happiness and not worry of what might be. And that’s what I intend to do.
In my work I want to find my inner peace. I want to feel peaceful in my own body. This peacefulness I’ll try to find through wool. Wool, to me, is a comfortable, cozy material that reminds me of my mom and all the women in my life that have knitted me socks and sweaters through the years, and of course, it reminds me of Iceland. Wool means home.

To feel safe and peaceful in my own body I need to start seeing it as a beautiful friend, instead of an ugly enemy. Although I find beauty in ugliness, I don’t see it in mine. ’Ugly’ is intriguing to me, so it’s not too farfetched to dream that one day I’ll be able to see my own body in that same light. Beauty and ugliness are not opposites, they are siblings. One needs to know beauty in order to know ugly. According to Stephen Bayley, author of the book Ugly: the aesthetics of everything, beauty can be soporific and predictable, but ugliness is stimulating (Bayley, 2013) and I have to agree. I remember when I heard ’All falls down’ by rapper Kanye West (2014) for the first time. In it there’s a line that goes: “The prettiest people do the ugliest things” and that line stuck with me. I even wrote it down in my diary. This doesn’t have to only refer to physical appearance, it means that anything beautiful has ugliness and vice versa, i.e. we may be nice people, but we’ve all done bad things, and you can’t pick one side to be on for the rest of time, the ‘beauty team’ or ‘ugly team’. One simply does not exist without the other, just like heaven needs hell. To help me find ways to establish trust in something where my power is little to none, i.e. my body, I’ve turned to religion to find answers. A quick google search on ‘how to become religious’ led me to a website where a Christian pastor answered that same question:

Pagan converts to the [Christian] mainstream did not, for the most part, first understand the faith and then decide to become Christians; rather, the process was reversed: they first decided and then they understood […] they were first attracted by the Christian community and form of life. (Christ Presbyterian Church, ask pastor Graham)

My body scares me, and I can’t look past the fear. I can’t see the beauty of it. It turned against me and tried to kill me. To help me find the beauty in it, I think of the little things that occur inside it every second. The blood flowing, lungs filling with air, the muscles expanding and contracting. It’s beautiful. And this is my way of having a sense of community within myself and hopefully come to have religious-like trust in my body.

It’s early morning 
No-one is awake
I’m back at my cliff
Still throwing things off
I listen to the sounds they make
On their way down
I follow with my eyes ’til they crash
Imagine what my body would sound like
Slamming against those rocks
When it lands
Will my eyes
Be closed or open?
I go through all this
Before you wake up
So I can feel happier
To be safe again with you
(Björk, 1995)

My interpretation of these lyrics is that in order to be able to fully appreciate what you have, you have to imagine what life would be like without it. This is what I have to do: I must think of all the bad things my body has avoided through the years, be thankful for my health, and in that way, hopefully repair the trust that was broken.
CAN I HEAL MYSELF THROUGH CRAFT?

I come across an article where Leo Jansen, curator of the Van Gogh museum, is asked why he thinks Van Gogh created such great amount of sunflower paintings. Jansen replies: “I think he painted them for the sheer joy of it” (BBC: Van Gogh’s sunflowers: the unknown history). I can’t help but think that the art created by an artist such as Vincent Van Gogh, who had a difficult life struggling with mental illness and alcoholism (Van Gogh museum: Hospitalization) would reflect those struggles, but instead he painted beautiful sunflowers and landscapes. I imagine that making beautiful things inspired hope in him and that he wanted to surround himself with positivity and beauty to erase the darkness in his life. Can I too use craft to evoke hope in me? Make something beautiful to look at, so that I can forget about my fear for a little while? Is the mission then completed? Will I be healed? Maybe, I will surely still have my moments of fear, but I now realize that invoking hope once in a while is far better than getting consumed by fear. Alain De Botton, founder of the school of life, says that art should evoke hope and that using art functions as a life raft in this world of darkness that we live in (Youtube: Alain De Botton on art as therapy). In my moments of fear, I can use craft to bring out hope and happiness in me.
In the summer of 2017 I did an internship at Studio Claudy Jongstra. Jongstra is a Dutch textile artist that felts murals and wall hangings as well as installation pieces. In her works she explores the craft of dyeing, spinning, carding and felting and believes that in order to understand the materials, one has to know the history of it i.e. the agricultural and ecological aspects of it. She centers her work around sustainability in a world where global ecological degradation is an urgent problem (claudyjongstra.com). I got to work closely with Jongstra, watch her process and help create the artwork. Although I see my own practice very different from hers, in the sense that my works are more experimental and not as sophisticated as hers, I know I’ve taken an unfathomable amount of knowledge and techniques from her.

Another inspiration of mine is the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. At the age of 18, on her way home from school, she had a life altering experience when her school bus got into a terrible accident in which several people were killed. Kahlo was hospitalized in such grave condition that the doctors were uncertain whether she would survive. She was put on bed rest for three months, but the accident robbed her of her physical health indefinitely. The accident was followed by a sort of rebirth for Kahlo, it was in her confinement that she began to paint and rediscover herself (Kettenmann, 1993). She used art as therapy through the trauma she had experienced and became one of the most celebrated female artist in history for it.

My third inspiration is the Romanian artist couple Ritzi and Peter Jacobi. While together, they created sculpture-like tapestries on a massive scale with abstract surfaces, grotesque qualities and unconventional beauty (Douglas, 1994). Their works bring a sense of relief to the people who, like me, can’t stand the universal assumptions made about textiles and how precious they are. They challenge the viewers’ preconceptions of what tapestry making should be. I find their works to be intriguing on many levels, the tapestries are beautifully made while the subject is grotesque and ‘ugly’ looking, but when looking at it as a whole, it’s perfect.
As I enter the process of creating my work, my mind is not consumed by the background of it. I instead allow myself to dive into the experimental habit of my process, free from restriction. I have an infatuation with big, rough structures that make me feel both disgusted and intrigued at the same time. Felting is a textile method that fits me perfectly – it’s a beautiful technique that requires precious materials and certain expertise, but I can manipulate those beautiful materials into shapes and structures that maybe wouldn’t be seen as traditionally beautiful.

I dye wool and silk in various shades of pink. Both because it resembles the color of intestines and because pink makes me feel good and safe, pink is also said to have a tranquilizing effect (Lam, 1996:111). I then care for the wool, comb it into thin cardings and mix it with silk. I lay out my bubble wrap on a flat surface and place the cardings on top. I have control now, but only to an extent. I control the size, thickness, color and compactness of the end result, but the outcome, the look of the finished product, I have to leave up to chance. This is a beautiful metaphor of the ties between my mind and body. I can feed my body, exercise it and nurture it but I can only hope to enjoy the fruits of that labor, in the end it all comes down to chance, one can only control so much.

I pour water and soap over the cardings and massage them with my fingers. I then take my angle grinder and attack the material, I penetrate it with the grinder, throw the felt carelessly around, I stomp on it, use my whole body and all my focus, and suddenly, I become distanced from myself for a moment. Enraptured by the process of making.

My strongest area of interest at this point is experimenting with materials, creating structures and figurative objects using unconventional methods. Methods that might not be seen as ‘good’, ‘acceptable’ or ‘respectable’ techniques to use in the field of textile craft. These unconventional methods that challenge the preconceived notions of what makes textiles precious, are what excite me. Who created the textile hierarchy? Why can’t a piece of felt covered in gelatin and wax be put on the same pedestal as a traditional weave? I take more wool and felt little hollow ‘worms’ with it. They look fine but I need to make them more repulsive and intriguing, so I warm up some gelatin to rub on it. Then I sew them on the beautiful felted piece and suddenly it’s not so beautiful anymore, but instead, it has aroused my curiosity.

In my work I want to materialize and visually communicate what I lack in words. The beautiful ugliness of my relationship with my body. I am fascinated by microscopic pictures of the inside of a body, blood cells, muscles and veins. Comparing these photos to pictures taken in space I see they are fascinatingly similar. The human body and the universe are not too different. In fact, according to a study made by Iranian and American medical science students: “The form of our universe is completely enfolded in a biological cell” (Arjamrooz, McConnell, Azari, 2011:2176). I like thinking of my body as a universe, that the cells inside it are miniature people, and that the universe we know is like a gigantic matryoshka doll. I need to take this fascination and apply it onto my own body and thereby awaken my curiosity in it instead of fear.
THE WORK

My felted pieces will hang in a sizeable circle, I chose a circle because it symbolizes harmony and wholeness (University of Michigan: Circle) and I want my work to invite the viewer to step inside, thus, scale is of vital importance. The work is dependent on an audience, it is activated by the viewer because it illustrates the inside of the body that steps inside it. Once I step inside the work, I hope the piece will overwhelm me with a sense of calm and unity and yet, seduce and awaken curiosity in me simultaneously.

The visual premise of the work was to depict the human body and its intestines in an abstract form. Which it does, but that is not all I want the viewer to take from it. I want the viewer to feel as if they're spectating their own bodies, as though the felts are mirrors that can see through flesh. The felts have a figurative form that has made me view them as beings rather than a depiction of a dissected body. The scale and form of the work leaves room for imagination, and one could argue that they bear a resemblance to portals, portals into the body. The work is supposed to make me feel as if I am surrounded by my own body, now I can see inside it. I don’t have to visualize it anymore, I can look at it, touch it, and see that it’s not as frightening as I thought. The felts provide myself with calmness, a feeling of oneness with the universe, they help me understand my body, and I can only hope they make others feel the same.
THE SOUND

While the textiles are the primary focus of my work, sound plays an important role in it as well. The sound guides the audience towards the feeling I want the work to induce. Hopefully the work will encompass me on a spiritual journey towards a place where I can feel peaceful in my body. I am aware that experiences are subjective and what works for me won’t work for everybody, whatever feelings the observer might feel are welcome. Of course I want them to feel good, but I can’t promise that. The work alone could be interpreted as repulsive or chilling, but combined with the sound I’ve created, which is serene and mild, made from bodily noises such as stomach growls combined with my brother’s Icelandic throat singing, the work becomes peaceful. Sound, to me is a perfect tool to guide towards what you want to invoke. I think music has power to set a mood and relate to feelings that you don’t even have words for and that’s why I wanted to incorporate sound into my work.

CONCLUSION

I embarked on a mission I have thought to be impossible for me, a mission to reconnect with my body and trust it. I had given up on ever being able to do so, but through craft I’ve managed to do just that. Through working with wool and felting, I feel calmer and at ease. Through felting I find joy in the making process, and in turn create pieces that please me to look at. I’ve discovered a way to find beauty in my world of fear. I aimed to repair the broken trust I feel between myself and my body, and though I may not have managed to repair it totally, I feel more at peace in my body. I know it’s not “out to get me” and that we are in this together, my body and I. On this mission to heal my trauma I’ve used methods from artists that have paved the way for me, I felted my wool in Claudy’s fashion, respected and cared for the materials I used. I made my works “ugly beautiful” in the aesthetic I imagine would make Ritzi and Peter Jacobi proud and I used my pain like Frida Kahlo. I feel like I have a special connection with Kahlo, I know it’s small but we both experienced our physical traumas in Mexico, I feel as if we therefore share a bond. I feel a bond with anyone that has experienced a similar thing, a disconnection from the body, but she thought me how to use that experience to experience a type of rebirth.
I had planned to present my work hanging from a large metal ring, I created a 3-diameter ring and due to suggestions from classmates and teachers I decided to see what it would look like if I felted around the ring to hide the metal. To make the work feel more organic, as if the portrayed body is growing over everything like ivy. I liked the outcome and decided to keep it.

The feeling I got as I stood inside the circle for the first time was unexpected. I had almost lost hope in it having any real impact on me. I had spoken about what feelings I wanted the experience to bring and therefore thought I had jinxed it. Thankfully I hadn’t, the feeling of standing in the middle of my work was something I find very hard to describe. It was a feeling that came from a place deep within me, a feeling I can best describe by comparing it to the feeling of going to bed after an unplanned but perfect day. A shocking feeling of sheer contentment, everything just felt right. The installation surely brought what I had hoped for and more, but the process of making the work helped immensely, even more than the installation itself. During the discussion after my presentation I was questioned on my choice of not displaying the making process in the installation and my answer to that is that I felt the need to keep those two apart, the installation and the process. The installation is an attempt at relating my feelings towards my body to others, while the making process is something that only my body and I get to share. I see the making process as a work of its own, a work that was only made for us (my body and I) and can only be experienced by us. Nonetheless, I think I will experiment more with how I present the work in the future, but right now, in this very moment, I feel closed off to suggestions from others on how to present my work. I feel very protective of it, it has become my baby. After our discussion I was told that my opponent, Signe Johansson had
said that I was stubborn. I found that comment to be a nice compliment since I think most people who’ve known me during these three years at Konstfack would agree that “stubborn” has rarely applied to me. I’ve always been open, maybe even too open to suggestions from others and compromised my own beliefs in order to please them. This project as given me the strength and courage to stand up for my beliefs. I feel like what I presented is the absolute best I can do at this moment in time and I’d rather stand and fall with that than present something I don’t fully believe in. I had planned to try and test new things during the days before the spring exhibition but due to a lot of misunderstandings and bad planning on my behalf I didn’t get a chance to test or change a lot. I did felt a new piece though, a small rug to place in the middle of the circle to guide the viewer towards the middle of the work. I don’t think that I’d kept the rug had I been placed at another spot in the exhibition, but the rug served another purpose as well. In the middle of my work was a big “CAUTION!” sign printed on the floor that I felt clashed with my work so the rug got to stay on the floor in order to keep the composition of the work intact. In all honesty I was very disappointed with my work at the exhibition. I felt that it lost all its sense of grandiose and that I could have made it much better had I planned my time better and pushed harder for the wall I had expected to be built behind the work (to hide the trash behind it). Instead I settled for a simple, low quality wall that my dad and I put together two days before the exhibition. Failing was a learning experience in itself that will hopefully benefit me in the future. I admit though that with every day that passes I see less and less problems and become more positive towards the installation of my work, but on the other hand I fear that that’s maybe the same effect that a crack in a bedroom wall has on the bedrooms’ resident. You’ll see it at first but then you stop noticing it. All in all, I feel that I’ve found a method for me. A method with endless possibilities to use in the future, the method of healing through craft. Healing through craft is possible, but as I said during my presentation, it hadn’t worked had I not decided that it would. The project was a collaboration between my mind and body. I find that the Icelandic saying “Hugurinn ber þig aðeins hálfa leið” or “The mind only carries you halfway” applies here. Had I decided to heal myself with solely my thoughts I would have failed. Through the process of making, I connect-ed both my mind and body. My mind needed my craft and my craft needed my mind.

A viewer responding to the work during the examination
Photo: Clara Birnbaurm Pantzerheil
REFERENCES

BOOKS:


ARTICLES:


DIGITAL SOURCES:


Youtube: Alain De Botton on art as therapy. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFnNgTSkHP-M&t=771s. Accessed: 28/02/2019

SOUND:


Björk 1995, *Hyper-Ballad*, Post, One Little Indian, Elektra
Pictures from Mexico

Claudy Jongstra, Fields of transformation
MY BODY IS A TEMPLE

Vincent Van Gogh, Sunflowers
Frida Kahlo, The broken column
Ritzi and Peter Jacobi, Ileanda II
Brain cell, Picture from space
MY BODY IS A TEMPLE

PROCESS
The finished work