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LIVING HYSTERICALLY

by

JESSICA CALDAS

Under the Direction of Pamela Longobardi, MFA

ABSTRACT

Living Hysterically is an immersive exhibition of multi-disciplinary works that explore the ordinary lived experiences of women and highlight women's constant relationship with labor and pain. Pain can be considered a uniquely feminine issue. In *Living Hysterically*, each series of work presents a picture of past, present, and future tied to three generations of women. These stories provide an entry point into the personal experiences, both positive and negative, that fill the lives of women. The work illustrates the forces working in these lives that create a spectrum of violence, from the mundane to the traumatic, and the ways women survive and thrive beyond this violence. Together these drawings, sculptures, and interdisciplinary works claims space for women's stories too often denied in public, creating representations that are more complex and thoughtful than the usual discourse. Moving through the installation becomes an exercise in empathy moving towards understanding and change.

INDEX WORDS: Women, Pain, Lived experience, Everyday violence, Trauma, Feminism, Hysteria, Stigma, Empathy, Installation, Multidisciplinary

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by

JESSICA CALDAS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2019

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2019

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JESSICA CALDAS

Committee Chair: Pamela Longobardi

Committee: Ruth Stanford

Stephanie Kolpy

Cynthia Farnell

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Academic Assistance

College of the Arts

Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the women I have known, past, present, and future; to those that share their stories with me, and especially to my mothers, my sisters, and my daughter.

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First, I would like to thank my committee: Pam Longobardi, Ruth Stanford, Stephanie Kolpy, and Cynthia Farnell. The time they have given me during this thesis process has been invaluable and their faith in my vision and work was unwavering. They gave me courage in the face of many struggles as I moved forward with these ideas. I would also like to thank the faculty and staff at GSU, who have been so supportive during my three years in this program, and in particular, Adrienne Gonzales and Jac Kuntz who manage to keep everyone on track. Outside of the arts school, I am very grateful for the Anthropology department at GSU and their willingness to welcome a wayward graduate arts student with no Anthropology background. From this department I am especially grateful to Dr. Jennie Burnet, whose class opened my mind to new ways of thinking and new language about the issues that matter to me. Of course, I could not have accomplished the work I have done without the incredible support of my family and close friends. My husband, Brian, who has taken on most of the care of our daughter during this time. My mother, Elizabeth, who has offered up her life to my art with incredible generosity and become a kind of collaborator with me. The rest of my family for their constant support and encouragement. My friends, Bridget, Ambre, Jenna, and Milana, who have always been patient with my schedule and with me and have always been there to cheer me on. Finally, Living Melody Collective, without whom I especially could not have survived the past year.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Women's lives are stories of pain. Our stories are not only pain; a truly complete representation of a woman's life would necessarily include joy, ecstasy, triumph, love, courage, desire, etc. Like any person, a woman is a full human, capable of all these things. Yet pain is where the center of womanhood has rested for so long that it has become a part of how we understand the world, how the world perceives us, and how the world and the woman function together. Of course, pain does not only belong to women. All humans feel pain and it is a particularly potent piece of life for all the marginalized. But I speak from the experience of a woman and it is that experience I am concerned with. The question is, how do we, as the world, receive that experience? The answer is and has been for a long time; not very well. Mythology has rendered us suspect. Science has diagnosed us hysterical. History has continuously found us guilty. Our mere existence is reduced to the questions: "Why are you here? What purpose do you serve? And how are you wrong?" Ultimately, our experiences of pain continue to be diminished by others, and yet we continue to struggle, survive, and thrive.

I am a survivor of rape. Aside from this specific experience of gender-based trauma, I am also a woman who, like all women, navigates the world very particularly - I am consistently anticipating the next moment in which I must guard myself, shift my behavior, or otherwise be prepared for those expectations placed on me by the world as one of the "lesser sex." I know so many women, my friends and my family and those I do not know well at all, who share these feelings. I know so many who have gathered up these stories, like layers of thick blankets weighing them down, keeping them still, too heavy and too warm, suffocating them. These stories, ranging from everyday violence to trauma, share some common traits: they are stories of labor and they live behind walls in the form of silence. For so long, these kinds of experiences

have been kept quiet through stigma. It is through this stigma that the violence, and the resulting pain, persists. It is through this silence that the stories are denied and diminished. It is through the breaking of this silence and stigma, through the testimony of women and witnessing of all, that these stories can shift the culture that makes them possible in the first place. *Living Hysterically* presents a picture of women's stories where pain is a complex, concrete, mundane, and undeniable part of our lives through an installation of drawings, sculpture, and video projection, and seeks to create a space of empathy and acknowledgement, shifting our collective response to women's lived experiences.

2 UNDERSTANDING PAIN

“Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language.”

— Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*¹

Understanding the pain of others is a tricky task, made more intangible through the difficulty of language, laden with the limits of experience and bias, and burdened with the risk of sensationalism and exploit. Yet it is through attempting this understanding that we develop empathy and perform better as communities in responding to the pain of others. One of the best tools we have for understanding pain is understanding the violence that causes it. Understanding violence and all the intricacies of how it affects a person and the ways in which it manifests can be complicated as well, but to help us with this task we have the language and studies of anthropologists.

¹ Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain*. Oxford University Press, 1985, 4.

I am interested in the idea of violence as a spectrum of events, actions, and forces that a person interacts with throughout their lives. In some cases, violence occurs as a sudden, traumatic event. Much more often, violence is a normalized part of our everyday lives or a force exerted by the cultural and social systems we inhabit. Before we can develop the idea of the spectrum, finding an adequate definition of violence is an important starting point. Johan Galtung's theory of violence gives us a nice set of broad categories of violence: Galtung develops a typology for violence that explains the nuances and varieties of violence and how they feed into each other in society.² Galtung introduces the relationship between direct violence, defined as events, structural violence, defined as a process that can be both physical and mental, and cultural violence, defined as a permanence in society.³ For Galtung, each of these types of violence is necessary to completely understand the ways in which actions grow within society to become directly violent and equally necessary to understanding how they are justified. While I like these categories to start with, I think Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois' definition is the most useful for rounding out the idea of violence on a spectrum:

Violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality – force, assault, or the infliction of pain – alone. Violence also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim. The social and cultural dimensions of violence are what gives violence its power and meaning. Focusing exclusively on the physical aspects of torture/terror/violence misses the point and transforms the project into a clinical, literary, or artistic exercise, which runs the risk of degenerating into a theatre or

² Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence." *Journal of Peace Research*. 1990.27 (3), 292-294.

³ *Ibid*, 294.

pornography of violence in which the voyeuristic impulse subverts the larger project of witnessing, critiquing, and writing against violence, injustice, and suffering.⁴

Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois' broad definition of violence makes it clear that failing to acknowledge this application and focusing on only the physical component is a failure to truly understand violent actions and the implications of a variety of violence. What this definition does then is to acknowledge the results of violence (in other words pain) while also bringing back into focus "everyday violence" - those daily occurrences which are a normalized part of our routine of living and for which we so seldom have words or descriptors. Arthur Kleinman introduced the concept of the "violences of everyday life" as structural violence that causes social suffering.⁵ Though the understanding of structural violence is generally accepted to apply to the lowest levels of the social world, those that are most poor, Kleinman's argument is centered on the idea that "violence and suffering affects members of all social strata."⁶

Everyday violence is the key to approaching an understanding of the way pain functions in women's lives. For women, who are already extraordinarily more likely to experience direct violence and trauma at some point in their lives (doubly and triply so for women of color, non-binary, and non-cisgender women), the fact is that we are subject to smaller acts of violence every day. For a woman, a general, not extraordinary day might look like this:

We step outside in the morning and must decide whether to turn back for the headphones we left behind on the off chance they might protect us from street harassment we are likely to face.

⁴ Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, "Introduction: Making Sense of Violence." In *Violence in War and Peace*, eds. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, 1.

⁵ Arthur Kleinman. "The Violences of Everyday Life: The Multiple Forms and Dynamics of Social Violence." In *Violence and Subjectivity*. V. Das, ed. Pp. 226-241. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, 226.

⁶ *Ibid*, 228.

When we fail to respond “appropriately” to the demand to smile on the bus, we are called a bitch and berated for our stuck-up ugliness. Though there are onlookers, no one steps in to defend us.

At work we are chastised for using the restroom too many times, even though we are on our period. If we shared this information, we would likely be mocked, ridiculed, or chastised again for being inappropriate.

When we return home alone at night, we have our keys tucked tightly between our fingers, just in case we might need to defend ourselves.

This list leaves out that we are bombarded by media that tells us how we are supposed to look and act; that we are paid less than our male counterparts;⁷ that we are expected to balance home life and work life perfectly while those same male counterparts are praised for doing the bare minimum at home and the same amount as us at work; our labor as mothers remains discounted when considering the value of economic work in our country; and that we are expected to perform emotional labor in every personal and working relationship; and so on and so on.

Much of the pain tied to this violence is based on the expectation of uncompensated (either monetarily or through lack of acknowledgement) labor. For women, these acts are part of a spectrum of violence where one end of the spectrum normalizes behavior that causes us pain, thus influencing and skewing the other end of the spectrum where direct violence and trauma live. The skew works with two forces: the first force being the normalization of micro aggressions and other inappropriate and sexist behaviors normalization starts to bleed into the rest of the spectrum making acts of direct violence become more acceptable. The second force is

⁷ “Pay Equity & Discrimination.” Institute for Women’s Policy Research. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://iwpr.org/issue/employment-education-economic-change/pay-equity-discrimination/>.

in the perception of these acts, where the normalization of these behaviors is part of a larger history of ignoring women's agency and feeds into the diminishing of women's experiences.

These acts of violence are so mundane, and this labor so normalized and accepted in our society, that we barely categorize them as such. In fact, many people, both men and women, would likely not categorize these acts, these micro aggressions, as violent and would rather chalk them up as average inconveniences, missteps, and slights and continue to ignore them. But within these lists there is evidence of structural and cultural violence.

To start, these are ways of understanding the way violence functions in women's lives.

3 PERPETUATING PAIN

“To tell a story and have it and the teller recognized and respected is still one of the best methods we have of overcoming trauma.”

-Rebecca Solnit, *Cassandra Among the Creeps*⁸

Paul Farmer agrees with Kleinman's theory of the “violences of everyday life,” though with the caveat that the poor are more likely to suffer and also pointing out the most important factor; “they are most likely to have their suffering silenced.”⁹ The issue of silence is key to the struggle of facing violence, whether direct or indirect manifestations of cultural and structural violence as many of these anthropologists describe. Without language and the ability to name this kind of suffering, the violence goes on, accepted through its inability to be defined. Our culture's history of erasing women's stories, especially those tied to pain, is a part of a larger practice of silencing that ultimately perpetuates that pain and continues to skew the spectrum of

⁸ Rebecca Solnit. “Cassandra Among TheCreeps.” *Harper's Magazine*, October 2014. <https://harpers.org/archive/2014/10/cassandra-among-the-creeps/>.

⁹ Paul Farmer. “On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below.” In *Social Suffering*. V. Das, A. Kleinman, and M.M. Lock, eds. Pp. 261-284. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 280.

violence against them. Mythology, science, and history have worked together in our culture to render women's experiences as unbelievable through a campaign that tell us that we are unreliable narrators. By creating doubt, society takes control of our own experiences away from us and instead casts guilt, shame, and stigma on us.

Elaine Scarry's "The Body in Pain," was first published in 1985, a year prior to the Supreme Court's decision to recognize "sexual harassment" as a violation of Title VII.¹⁰ Although she is not specifically addressing the pain of women, her text is concerned with the inability to describe pain, and the way pain takes away our language. Pain is "language destroying."¹¹

...but pain is not "of" or "for" anything - it is itself alone. This objectlessness, the complete absence of referential context, almost prevents it from being rendered in language: objectless, it cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal.¹²



Figure 1 - *Carrying On for Ten Years (Extended)*, 2018, Mixed Media Installation, 8x30 feet

¹⁰ "Meritor Savings Bank, FSB v Vinson (1986) USSC 139; 477 U.S. 57; 106 S.Ct. 2399; 91 L.Ed.2d 49; No. 84-1979 (19 June 1986)," accessed November 25, 2018, <http://www.worldlii.org/us/cases/federal/USSC/1986/139.html>.

¹¹ Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain*. Oxford University Press, 1985, 35.

¹² *Ibid*, 162.

For Scarry, this difficulty in communication and pain's "objectlessness" means that our intermediaries are even more important to articulating pain: our doctors, archivists, and partners.¹³ In this way, artists act as mediators as well. Artists have the ability to objectify pain in ways that others cannot.

Carrying on for Ten Years (Expanded) is a 30-foot-long mixed media installation. Although it composed primarily of wall-based drawings, the work also includes thread, fabric, objects (small vials) as well as archives/evidence of policy work done outside of the gallery. The drawings contain figurative elements, text, and abstract marks. Altogether, the work is meant to tell the story of my mother's trauma, her relationship to me, my trauma, and my/our journey through recovery. This piece works to describe the pain caused by rape, and the struggle of subsequent recovery. These stories sit against a backdrop of social and political history concerning sexual assault, the primary trauma on display within the piece. *Carrying On* does this in many ways but the primary way the work seeks to quantify this pain is through a complicated layering of images, text, and medium. The figures I have rendered blend in and out of the backgrounds they rest on. The text layers overlap figures and move behind them. Figures encroach each other's territories. These layers frustrate the notion of foreground and background and contribute to conceptualizing pain within the piece, speaking to the ideas inherent to understanding, experiencing and overcoming trauma. Within the entire work, the materials that compose the foreground and background are in constant push and pull. This "all over" quality gives the painting object hood with its own phenomenology. The pain *Carrying On* is describing is rendered not through specific language but through the bodily experience of moving around the work. Through work like this artists can become intermediaries of pain, combatting it's

¹³ Elaine Scarry. *The Body in Pain*. Oxford University Press, 1985, 6-11.

“objectlessness” and “language destroying” qualities. Through this work, I have chosen to become a storyteller of a specific kind of pain that is not often shared publicly. There are stigmas around rape that silence survivors, but choosing to tell the story in this way, through the mediation of art, both captures the immutability of the experience and simultaneously combats those stigmas.



Figure 2 - Carrying On for Ten Years (Extended), Detail, 2018, Mixed Media Installation, 8x30 feet

Story telling is the key to fighting the perpetuation of pain and violence done to women. Story telling is testimony. The act of telling our stories, which have been silenced for so long, becomes a way of healing and ending a cycle of denying our truth. The stories must be told over and over again though, and be told loudly and by many, because the fact is, it is too easy for

people to ignore us. It happens every day that a woman comes forward and is disbelieved. This disbelief is situated within a larger history and culture of discounting women's stories, a history where women are considered hysterical.

Hysteria has been a tool of silencing women for some time. Hysteria began as a catch all diagnosis that was attached to symptoms as varied as fainting spells to persistent headaches to actual spells of terror. Often, this diagnosis was used against women who defied the gender norms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁴ Named for the womb, hysteria was tied to the belief that a woman's womb literally wandered about the interior of their bodies and caused these ailments based on its current location. Men were exempt. Culture and science's subjugation of independent women who act outside the acceptable gender norm continues today. In contemporary society, women's bodies are regulated repeatedly with regard to their choices, even when those choices are necessary medically. Women's feelings of pain and discomfort are more often ignored or down played by their doctors, resulting in a country like America, with the best medicine in the world, possesses a mortality rate for laboring and post-partum mothers of that of a third world country.

Eventually, hysteria would be released from its gender-based chains. Jean-Martin Charcot's work would do this through his studies of women and men previously diagnosed with hysteria. Simultaneously, Charcot would continue to ignore the actual voice of his patients, failing to understand how listening to their stories "might contribute to their own treatment."¹⁵ Although hysteria would be freed from exclusively gendered connotations, it would continue to be used to describe specific types of individuals, namely those with "decadent personalities,"

¹⁴ Kristen Oelrich. "From diagnoses to decadence: A brief history of hysteria." *Art Criticism*. 17, 2002, 86-103.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 91.

where the token traits associated with those personalities were often based on stereotypes of women deviating from the ideal model.¹⁶

Hysteria continues to remain deeply connected to women's expression of pain, where pain includes expressions of unease, discomfort, dissatisfaction, depression, and a wide spectrum of emotions. Women moved from being diagnosed medically to being called hysterical by society. Women are too emotional! Once again, men become exempt from this particular name-calling. If men are "too emotional" they are being compared to women as an insult to hegemonic ideas of masculinity. The presumption that women are too "taken" by their feelings allows society to patronize them and discount the stories they tell as fancies or exaggerations. This means that the stories women tell of violence are easy to question, because it is a norm to question women's truth. This questioning persists, and the pain and violence perpetuates.

In this situation, the mediators named by Scarry are so entrenched in the culture that they become unable to assist with the articulation of pain as deemed appropriate by their roles. Science, government, and medicine fails to hear the story women are telling them and if they do hear then they fail to react appropriately. This is when testimony, and especially repeated testimony, becomes crucial. This is when the role of the artist to mediate these stories becomes equally powerful.

4 REPRESENTING PAIN

"But "knowing the truth" does not come with redemption as a guarantee, nor does a feeling of redemption guarantee an end to a cycle of wrongdoing. Some would even say it is key to maintaining it, insofar as it can work as a reset button—a purge that cleans the slate, without any guarantee of change at the root."

¹⁶ Kristen Oelrich. "From diagnoses to decadence: A brief history of hysteria. *Art Criticism*." 17, 2002, 91.

— Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*¹⁷

The idea of the “dismay of images” is closely linked to the struggle to conceptualize pain linguistically as well as the issue of normalizing certain aspects of pain. The “dismay of images” is the regular reproduction of violence through media and images, which alters the experience of violence for those exposed to it.¹⁸ This disconnect between the “production and consumption of violence”¹⁹ creates a kind of distance between those witnessing, where they can step away from the violence, while simultaneously commodifying the images and altering what the experiences of suffering can be used for, such as “purposes of control.”²⁰ Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois specifically acknowledge the role of anthropologists and the media in this concept, pointing out for the need to understand the goals of their work so they do not become a part of the problem they seek to fight.²¹ Farmer’s view aligns with these ideas, pointing to the need for localized understanding of suffering within the “sheer weight of the suffering.”²²

In the decades since Scarry wrote on the immutability of pain, artists and writers have been examining the issues inherent to representing violence and pain. Two important texts have been crucial to this conversation: Susan Sontag’s “Regarding the pain of others,” and Maggie Nelson’s “The Art of Cruelty.” Each text examines relationships between the pain one person or community feels in relation to others and the distance that understanding takes up.

¹⁷ Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012, 32.

¹⁸ Arthur Kleinman. “The Violences of Everyday Life: The Multiple Forms and Dynamics of Social Violence.” In *Violence and Subjectivity*. V. Das, ed. Pp. 226-241. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, 231.

¹⁹ Ibid. 4.

²⁰ Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois. “Introduction: Making Sense of Violence.” In *Violence in War and Peace*, eds. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, 231-232.

²¹ Ibid. 26-27.

²² Paul Farmer. “On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below.” In *Social Suffering*. V. Das, A. Kleinman, and M.M. Lock, eds. Pp. 261-284. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 272.

Almost two decades after Scarry, Sontag's work followed. Like Scarry, Sontag is not overly concerned with the representation of violence against women. Rather, she is focused on the representation of violence in general, through photographs, and particularly during wartime. Many of Sontag's arguments are wrapped up in the history of photography but these ideas can be broadened to concern other mediums. Sontag discusses the distance of the viewer to depictions of wartime atrocities, setting representations of violence up as objects that create protest or awareness. Awareness lives in a complicated space: can those who have not experienced war ever really understand it? The representations themselves fall under scrutiny as well: is a beautiful and aestheticized image of pain authentic? If you cannot truly understand what you are looking at and if you cannot change it, are you not just a voyeur?²³

Some of these concerns can be tied back to the weight caused by a "dismay of images." This weight can immobilize the spectator, whose action is a necessity in battling the problem of their voyeurism. A person can become easily overwhelmed by the dismay of images when there is no space to respond and act: it implicates them in complacency.²⁴ The space for response and action becomes crucial. Additionally, she cites context as a key indicator in how we perceive and understand the images presented to us and cites captions and details that give images the information necessary to inform the viewer beyond their initial knee jerk reaction.²⁵ Sontag's descriptions of Alfredo Jaar's installations focus her need for text to supplement the image, and offers that both text and the immersive experience become vital to transforming the understanding of the viewer from that of voyeur who can simply turn away.²⁶

²³ Susan Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York, N.Y: Picador, 2003, 42.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 42.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 95.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 42.

Sontag's final concern is the relationship between shock and understanding. Inherent in images of violence is the question of whether such images fuel understanding or whether they perpetuate the violence they picture. Shocking images do not lose their power but they cannot necessarily help us to understand deeply. Such pictures are a part of history and remembering, but what is their true purpose? They may illicit sympathy, but does the sympathy atrocious images elicit actually help us understand or does it render us complacent?²⁷ Ultimately, Sontag concludes "An image is drained of its force by the way it is used."²⁸ Again, context matters and asking these questions while we look at these images is crucial.

Sontag's concerns about the value of shock in art are echoed in Nelson's text. She introduces the history of art's relationship to violence quickly, describing Antonin Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty" and explaining that violence has marked the "desire to break down the barriers between life and art" since the Futurists in 1930.²⁹ In detailing the "Theater of Cruelty" and Artaud's struggle with the need for intensity to render life through art, I am reminded of Scarry's description of imaging and the idea of making and imagining as thought without objecthood. For Nelson, the need for "violent rupture" to get closer to reality is risky for its flattening effect.³⁰ Like Sontag, she uses Jaar's work as an example but finds it faulty in its execution and positioning.³¹ Nelson leads us to her issues with what "looking at atrocity doesn't do" echoing Sontag's concerns, "repairing our ignorance about the history and causes of suffering, and charting a course of faction in response, tasks that may fall fairly and squarely

²⁷ Susan Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York, N.Y: Picador, 2003, 42.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 105.

²⁹ Maggie Nelson. *The Art of Cruelty*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012, 4-6.

³⁰ *Ibid*. 27-30.

³¹ *Ibid*, 26-27.

outside the realm of art?”³² For Nelson, like Sontag, the concern is whether violent images can do the work of creating understanding, rather than just creating strong emotions.³³

These concerns have been central to my practice since I began making work about gender-based trauma. The struggles to represent trauma without sensationalism, to do justice to the complicated stories I work to share, and to still have that work communicate the experience those stories are based on is a difficult balance. My daily performance piece, *#3everyday*, carried out in public spaces throughout the city of Atlanta, was a work that addressed these concerns. The piece was performed throughout the month of October three years in a row from 2015 through 2017. Initially, I conceived the work to bring awareness to National Domestic Violence Awareness Month and create an opportunity to learn about some of the specific characteristics of domestic violence relationships most often misunderstood by those who have not experienced it or do not work in the field. As an advocate working with domestic violence survivors, this was very important to me and I had previously created a body of work that attempted to do this. Because they were prints, I felt they were not able to communicate the particular havoc domestic violence wreaks on people’s lives, and the way this impact builds up and is often supported by the community around it, either actively or through silence. Additionally, I struggled with the work’s positive aesthetic qualities in regards to their depiction of violent and complex relationships.

³² Susan Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York, N.Y: Picador, 2003, 114.

³³ Maggie Nelson. *The Art of Cruelty*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012, 242.



Figure 3 - *Of Age*, 2013, Monotype, Relief, and Screen print techniques on paper, 18x24

In the first year of the performance, three women move and speak for roughly ten minutes. Their movements begin as slightly exaggerated pantomime of the kinds of general things women do as they prepare to leave the home. Putting on makeup. Playing with your hair. Checking yourself out in the mirror. While performing these movements, each woman recites aloud a series of questions; “Why did you stay?” “What did you think was going to happen?” “Why didn’t you get help?” Nine questions in all, each derived from actual conversations I had as an advocate when talking to others about domestic violence. After the first round of movement and language, the women recite together, “I’m sorry” seven times as two of them

shroud the third in a sheet. And then the cycle repeats. This time, the movement is more exaggerated, more aggressive. The questions are shorted, “Why did you!?” “How could you!?” “What were you!?” And then again, seven times of “I’m sorry” and one woman shrouds the last. The third cycle is the most aggressive and violent. In 2015 I always performed as the third and often left performances with blood on my legs, arms, or face. The questions become one word shouts: “WHY!?” “WHAT!?” “HOW!?” And finally, I would shroud myself while reciting “I’m sorry” seven times.



Figure 4 - #3everyday Performance Still, 2016

Although this performance was only ten minutes long, it often felt incredibly draining. Additionally, it was clear it could easily shock the public. Those passing by would often stop and stare, or rush past us in a hurry to escape the barrage of language and movement. But I was worried that what I was hoping to communicate through the performance, the complicated nature

of the violence and pain it causes was not coming through. Each movement and piece of language was chosen very specifically: women in domestic violence relationships are 70% more likely to be killed by their partner if they are attempting to leave, on average it takes a person 7 attempts to leave a violent relationship and stay gone, in the US three women are killed every day due to domestic violence, and finally, the phrase I heard most often out of victim's mouths when interviewing them as a court advocate was "I'm sorry," as if they had done something wrong. But these were subtle ideas, already hidden from the public via the silence around Domestic Violence. To combat the issue that the "dismay of images" might produce, the conversations the performers had with those that stopped to watch became a crucial part of the piece. In those conversations it became clear that some feelings that I hoped to communicate came across, regardless of whether a person had experienced domestic violence or not. For others, it was clear they recognized in the performance their own experience and expressed a sense of comradery, a sense that they did not always have in a world that stigmatizes this kind of trauma. In these ways the work was successful, and not just a shocking rehashing of trauma that pushes away the audience. Still, in the years following I altered the performance a little each year, hoping to complicate it, and to give a little more space for contemplation and recovery within the experience. Additionally, the conversation following the performance became a part of the work, and I began recording those conversations when possible.



Figure 5 - #3everyday Performance Still, 2016

I do believe that the role of art can be used to create understanding of particularly difficult and unspeakable experiences. The goal of this understanding can vary from work to work, and I think that is where Sontag and Nelson's concerns are most useful: does the work need space for contemplation or for the direction towards action because its goal is towards change? Or does the work merely hope to communicate an experience, in the hope that it can be a testimony of that experience?

5 LIVING HYSTERICALLY

In the exhibition *Living Hysterically* each work presents a picture of past, present, and future tied to the specific story of a woman or girl. These stories provide an entry point into the personal experiences, both positive and negative, that feature pain and fill the lives of women. Each story sits against a backdrop of social, political, and historical forces that illustrate the undercurrent of pain, trauma, and struggle each of us has faced. Beyond this, each work depicts an individual story that further complicates representations of women, showing us as creatures that overcome these forces and thrive despite them.



Figure 6 - *Living Hysterically Installation View, 2019*

5.1 The Future Ideal

Entering the exhibition, *Living Hysterically* first gives us an experience of hope. Projected on the front wall is a simple video work, *Progeny and Potential*, depicting an animation of my daughter walking and dancing. The drawings that make up the video are simple and rough, reflecting the learning my 15-month old daughter currently engages in every day. Her steps are imperfect and her dancing is without self-consciousness. She is at the center, unbothered, and as of yet, facing little in terms of outside forces that might seek to control or curb her.



Figure 7 - *Progeny and Potential*, Hand Drawn Animation, installation still, 2019

This video of my daughter is simple in execution. The frames are hand drawn and imperfect, which reflects her current state as well as a sense of intimacy. The video and her figure represent all the hope the future holds for every woman, and the possibilities that exist when women remain unconfined. Since it is the first encounter within the space, some of these feelings may not initially be apparent. At first glance, this video is likely to seem merely sweet. Because you must pass by the animation again as you exit the gallery, after seeing the rest of the work, the experience of the video changes. Against the backdrop of the other work that highlights the realities of past and present, suddenly the context of a young girl experiencing the world freely and with so much potential means so much more.

Nearby *Progeny*, is a guardian, overseeing her dance. *Lean In (Big Mama)*, is a soft sculpture from the series *Tired Bodies*. The first of four Tired Bodies in this exhibition, she sits, slumping, as a hint of what is to come. She is at once humorous and sad. Her too long arms and legs are hard to distinguish from her breasts and her soft and sagging body can hold nothing upright or in place. Like her sisters in the exhibition, she is clearly exhausted, worn down from labor yet defiant of all the gendered ideals society might place upon her. Each tired body is made from used sheets and other house linens. They possess a fleshy familiarity that is intimate and a little uncomfortable.

Certainly, the Tired Bodies mean to cue the female figure and concerns primarily relevant to women but within their figure is some ambiguity as well. Because their limbs, bodies, and breast are exaggerated, they also defy a necessarily female object hood. Within my work, this is the one nod to those who are not, or do not identify as, women.



Figure 8 - *Lean In (Big Mama)*, Bed sheets, poly fiber fill, antique chair, 2018

5.2 The Past and the Matriarch

Passing by *Big Mama* to the back gallery is an unsympathetic experience for the viewer. *The Matriarch* immediately confronts the viewer, a collage of 11 large-scale mixed media drawings that swallow up the back wall of the gallery. Large and unforgiving, these drawings are hung and layered together and reproduce the “all over” quality of my earlier paper based installations. *The Matriarch* is a spectacle, full-bodied confrontational experience.



Figure 9 - The Matriarch, Installation View, 11 Mixed media drawings on paper, 10x36 feet, 2019

This is my mother's story. This is a story of the past.

My mother acts, within my work, as a kind of icon of women's experiences. Tragically, she has experienced the entirety of what I consider the spectrum of violence against women, from mundane everyday violence to traumatic direct violence. Despite this, she has continued to overcome, as all women do. This series of portraits presents her life as a picture of the past, and places her story in the context of significant events that have occurred simultaneously with the events that have defined her life (both struggles and triumphs). Because most women share some, if not all, of these experiences, her personal story becomes a representation for all

women's experience, and become the placeholder for the spectrum of violence and women's strength in the face of this violence.



Figure 10 - *The Matriarch, Detail*, Mixed media drawing on paper, 2019

Much like other installations and large-scale works, this piece means to embody an entire experience and to describe a constant undercurrent of pain through the mundanity of life. Forcing

the viewer to maneuver through the works in a complicated and extremely physical fashion, the pieces hang at various heights, overlapping each other. Each drawing itself is a collage of figures and texts, all pulled from photos, documents, and letters that truly existed during these times in my mother's life. Throughout, aesthetic choices such as color blocks, sanded down segments, torn sections, and otherwise mean to convey more subtle notions of struggle, pain, joy, and other emotions. The main clues regarding time are contained within snippets of text, but also in the size of each piece itself, where this size speaks to the duration of time each piece describes.

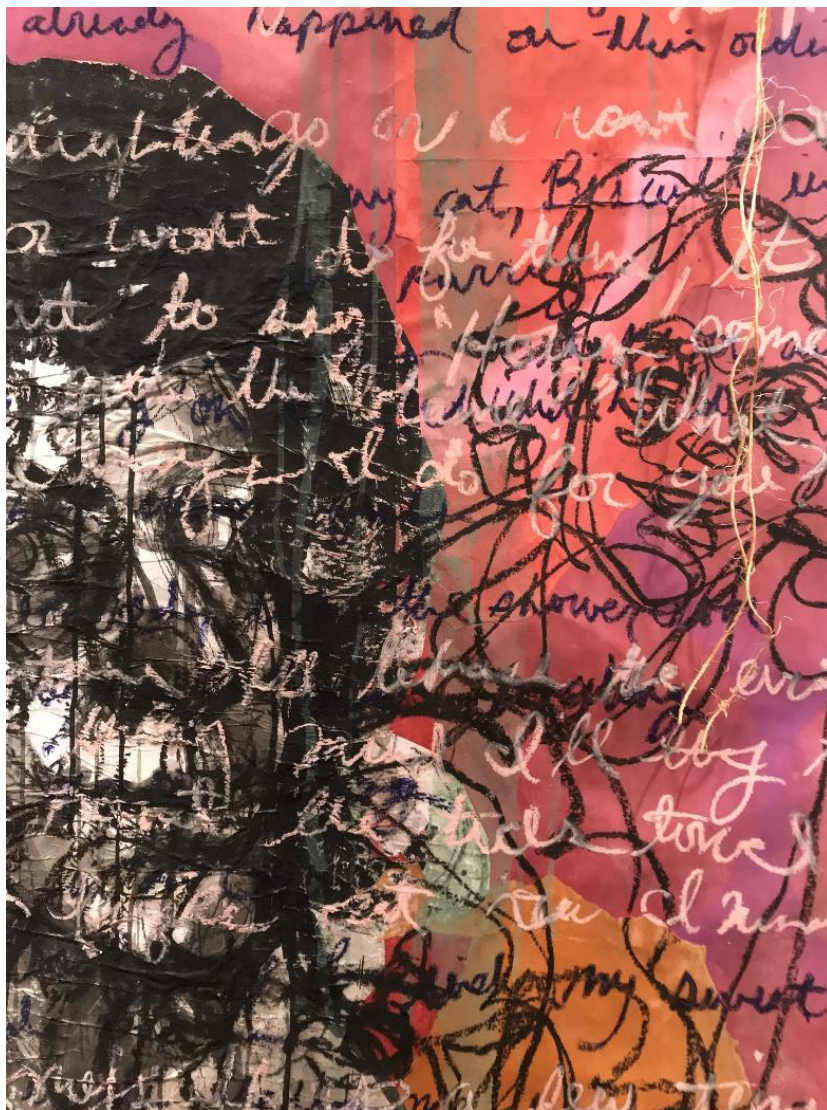


Figure 11 - *The Matriarch Timeline, Detail, Mixed media drawing on paper, 2019*

5.3 The Women of the Present

Situated in front of *The Matriarch* are the three sister *Tired Bodies*. These sculptures provide some relief from the experience of *The Matriarch*, but also complicate the experience of the work. Each sculpture is a portrait and presents a contemporary concern each person faces partially tied to their experiences as a woman. Together with *The Matriarch* these tired Bodies create an even more complicated idea of what it means to be a woman every day.

Caretaker is a portrait of my mother to carry over from *the Matriarch* into the present. She currently struggles with her lifelong role as a caretaker, her growing invisibility as an aging woman, and the emptiness these two forces have created in her life. At the same time as she deals with this emptiness, my mother has voluntarily returned to the role of caretaker, choosing to assist with the care of my daughter. The second, *Dilemma*, is of my sister who is concerned with the physical expectations placed on her throughout her life, and the pressures that come with personal and professional goals that contradict traditional gendered norms for young women. She is a force at work, rocketing through promotions in a demanding position that sends her all over the world every other week. Yet this job she loves is at odds with the dream she has always had to have a large family, and the question that seemingly only women must face: can she do and have it all? Finally, the last sculpture, *Complex*, is a portrait of myself and is specifically concerned with the contradictory perceptions placed on my female body as either a sexual being or a figure of motherhood. As a survivor of sexual trauma I have always had complicated feelings around my own sexuality which are only made worse by the expectations and pressures of the world around me. Recently, I have also become a mother, which is not something I necessarily expected and for a long time was not something I wanted. The role of motherhood begins with giving your body over to another being from the start, a feeling I

struggled with throughout my pregnancy. Even after giving birth, a mother's body very much belongs to her children, whether or not she chooses to breast feed. Both physically and mentally, I find myself at odds with my body and who I want to be as a woman. All of these concerns are specific to each of us and still universal to most women (and probably some who are not women).

Like *Big Mama* before them, each figure is also a little bit funny. They are lumpy and their exaggerated limbs feel comical next to the weight of bricks and cinder blocks. Their color is that of oversaturated and unrealistic flesh. They display constant labor and fatigue but they also shrug it off as a fact of their existence. These figures will persist in holding the weight and scrutiny of the world's demands for ages and while they may sag under the pressure, they will persist.



Figure 12 - *Years to date...*, Installation view with *Dilemma* and *Caretaker*, Hand painted bricks, 2019

Each of these sculptures present the figure as an abstracted form pulled apart by the forces represented. They sit against a backdrop of *the Matriarch* on one side and a brick wall on the other. The brick wall, *Years to date*, represents the gathered moments of my mother, my twin sister, my daughter, and myself. Each brick measures a year in our life and carries the weight of every moment where our being a woman has affected us in some specific way, creating a small struggle and contributing to the constant labor, pain, and violence in our lives. Built up together, the installation is a small picture of the barriers this spectrum creates, no matter how ordinary the moment may be.



Figure 13 - Caretaker, Installation View, Bed sheets, Poly Fiber Fill, Zinc Spine, Cinder Block, Rope, Twine, and hand painted rocking chair, 2019



Figure 14 - Dilemma, Installation View, Bed sheets, Poly Fiber Fill, Zinc Spine, Cinder Blocks, Rope, Twine, and hand painted frame, 2019



Figure 15 - Complex, Installation View, Bed sheets, Poly Fiber Fill, Zinc Spine, Cinder Block, Rope, Twine, and hand painted rocking chair, 2019

6 CONCLUSION

My original intention for the exhibition, *Living Hysterically*, was to focus entirely on representing the complexities of the spectrum of violence against women that I identified early on in my process. I have always been passionate about representing the stories associated with this spectrum, including the ways it affects our daily lives and the difficulties inherent to understanding it if you do not experience it directly. As I worked questions continued to nag at me. Is there more to this work than just representing the pain? Are there more to these stories than the experience of traumas both large and small?

I began to wonder how to express more hope and resilience in my work and that became the impetus for the way I developed the layout for *Living Hysterically*. Dividing the show into sections organized as past, present, and future was important to creating a space that could talk about all the realities of women's lived daily experiences. Some of these spaces needed to be an overwhelming spectacle and tap into the bodily experience that overcomes the immutability of pain. The past and present share that space, using that all over quality to share experiences that are absolutely crushing in how normalized and mundane they are. There also had to be space for hope and potential. The future space points towards ideals, potential, peace, innocence, and hope in this way. There is room to breathe here. Room to embrace the joy of dancing. Room to reflect on what we can learn from the past and present realities.

From representing pain pulled from a spectrum of violence to giving space for hope and the future, the organization of this show highlights the strength and resilience of women. Through all that they have to endure, women's stories remain important to share and tell so that we may better understand the realities of all that works against them and temper our reactions accordingly. Through all that they have to endure, women remain powerful.

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