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TRAUMA AND RECOVERY: A CONFSSIONAL PROCESS

by

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I utilize Abstract Expressionist aesthetics to create confessional art as a way to explore my personal recovery from a traumatic event in my past. *Recovering: A Memoir* is a series of confessional, process based paintings on 3D sculpted geometric canvases in an Abstract Expressionist style. Color choice, technical applications of paint, and the shape of each canvas reflect different aspects of my personal recovery. In order to remain consistent, I created a key of color choices that reflect my specific emotions, thus establishing a consistent language throughout the series. I also address the parallels between feelings and the passing of time, as they are inextricable from each other. Through the transformation of each of these feelings into physical entities, I create an extension of myself through *Recovering: A Memoir*. However, I do not purge myself of past feelings, as they will always be a part of me. *Recovering: A Memoir* intends to create a space for a discussion around the negative aspects of recovery and trauma. Through the appropriation of Abstract Expressionist technique, I will address how feelings are measured in intensity, length of time, and the spaces they occupy.

There are three artists that I especially drew from for inspiration: Joan Snyder, Tracey Emin, and Lee Bontecou. These women unapologetically express themselves and have established innovative and inspiring forms of art and communication. Through their works, they address issues relating to the body, emotions, trauma, time, space and the creation of it, and confessions. Bontecou, an American sculptor, explores ideas relating to the body and spaces. Snyder, an American Abstract Expressionist painter, “used the grid to deconstruct and retell the story of abstract painting” (“Joan Snyder”) exploring constructs such as the female body, emotions, time, and personal matters. Emin, a British contemporary artist, creates

autobiographical work (including drawings, paintings, sculpture, neon works, embroidery, photography, and film) that is both deeply personal and confessional.

The Abstract Expressionism movement arose after World War II as a product of the cultural pressure on American artists to define themselves independently of European artists. With time, the initial American context of this movement dissolved and the central theme of the Abstract Expressionist movement developed into the quest to find “pure” art through unconscious thought, with a focus on process and individual expression. The “unconscious is a very important side of modern art and I think the unconscious drives do mean a lot in looking at paintings,” (Ross 141). Letting go of conscious thinking allows me to express unconscious thoughts I have not previously, explicitly stated.

Expressing the intimate and painful experiences of trauma and recovery through an unconscious filter of abstract painting, roots the large canvases in pain and existentialism. “The basis of beauty is pleasure, and that of sublimity is pain or fear.” (Everitt 26) In reference to Abstract Expressionism, Motherwell remarks that a painting style “becomes sublime when the artist transcends his personal anguish, when he projects in the midst of a shrieking world an expression of living and its end that is silent and ordered,” (Everitt 26). For me, chasing the “sublime” signifies working through past traumas and the pain that surrounds them. The large canvases present my personal recovery as not only an image on the wall, but a reality and a new space. Consequently, I create a reality out of something only I have known and allow the viewer a private look inside my undisclosed experiences. Thus, expressing my recovery from trauma through Abstract Expressionism was an appropriate form, as it allowed me to focus on the process of both painting and my recovery.

Much of abstract expressionism takes advantage of large canvases to further imitate a new reality:

“Very large canvases altered the relation of the spectator to the work: he was no longer able to ‘take it in’ or frame it with a single glance. In fact, he was often overtaken by an expanse of colour which stretched far beyond his range of vision. Rothko argued in 1951 that ‘To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn’t something you command.’ It was no longer an object in an environment but an environment itself,” (Everitt 25)

In *Recovering: A Memoir*, I employ large convex canvases to submerge the viewer into a new environment in which unconscious recovery is explored. The pieces both create a new reality and occupy space, fairly representing the ways that trauma and recovery changed my reality and occupied my mind.

Bontecou utilizes size and structure as a way to address the space surrounding the piece and created through the center of the piece, as in *Untitled*, 1959. This new space partly worked so well because of the scale of the piece. “Scale was a major ingredient. As Clement Greenberg put it in 1948, ‘There is a persistent urge, as persistent as it is largely unconscious, to go beyond the cabinet picture, which is designed to occupy only a spot on the wall, to a kind of picture that, without actually becoming identified with the wall, like a mural, would spread over it and acknowledge its physical reality,’” (Everitt 25). The physical realities of Bontecou’s work also addressed nonexistent realities within her work. Bontecou “just got tired of sculpture as a big thing in the middle of a room. I wanted it to go into space.” (Porter) She both occupied and

created space within her art, and in turn creating space for her narrative and herself in the artworld. Her works were also corporeal, thus suggesting sensuality and an awareness of the body. “The tough, industrial exteriors of Bontecou's works function as frames for the void-like interiors. These gaps in the armor of her sculpture's surfaces are suggestive of bodily orifices that are somehow vulnerable and exposed.” (Porter) Bontecou's allusion towards the body through art, as well as the simultaneous occupation and creation of space by her art, serve as a large inspiration for my thesis, most importantly the ways I address space through my pieces.

Joan Snyder, another major inspiration for my thesis, has created a language through her consistency of the meanings behind her color choices and through her distinctive brush stroke patterns. The use of color and texture evokes conscious thoughts in the viewer. “The ‘pure’ red of which certain abstractionist speaks does not exist. Any red is rooted in blood, glass, wine, hunter’s caps and a thousand other concrete phenomena.” (Everitt 34) People respond viscerally to elements of abstraction, such as color, texture, forms, and so on. Therefore, enabling a dialogue between the artist and the viewer gives the latter the necessary tools to further interpret her pieces and the underlying themes they contain. For Snyder, the movement of the strokes imply processing emotions over time, while the drips running down the canvas also allowed the paint to move on its own in her “stroke paintings”, therefore forcing Snyder to release control of the resulting piece to the materials themselves. Snyder’s painting style reveals the “insistence on openness, on revealing the most intimate and often physical truths in her work,” (Herrera 22). Her work gives the viewer an intimate glimpse into the her creative thought process and the way she processes her personal experiences. “I was painting paint strokes. The strokes became a physical reality, not an illusion,” (Herrera 28). The strokes in Snyder’s piece build upon each

other, creating a physical object displaying movement, color and physicality of both paint and emotions, thus turning her work into a physical manifestation of her thoughts and emotions.

“Snyder had begun to treat paint as paint, not as a means to create illusion. Although they had emotional associations, the paint layers were an emphatically physical reality,” (Herrera 25).

Subsequently, Snyder expresses her thoughts and emotions in each stroke creating a tangible language.

“She also allowed her strokes to drip: drips become rivulets of feeling. Each stroke is a thing in itself. Each sings a different note. They do not join together to form a single chord, and no one stroke dominates. Each part of the canvas is as important as any other ... The strokes may stand for feelings, sensations, or sounds. Paint moving across the canvas embodies the passage of time and suggests a story line.” (Herrera 27)

The paint drips, moving vertically on the canvas, reference the time after the initial horizontal stroke, a time where the paint was moving across the canvas on its own after Snyder pushed the paint across the canvas with her brush, exemplifying the passage of time.

Snyder also creates art that directly addressed issues around the female body, as in *Tell My Sister*, 2012, thus creating sensual and corporeal messages within her art. “Snyder’s sensual gestures can be seen as a reaction against the pervasive minimal tendencies of the mid to late 1960’s[...] In contrast, [...] Snyder’s strokes were given full expression, where paint was allowed to spread, culminating in heavy drips, smears, and globs,” (Herrera 63-64). The feminine sexuality of Snyder’s work opposed the male-dominated Abstract Expressionist movement. Her work canonized feminine art and sexuality within the Abstract Expressionist movement, creating a space for herself.

Snyder's autobiographical nature of her work presents personal narratives, consistently explore through many different experimentations of technique and medium. "Snyder has extended the expressive potential of abstract painting, inspiring generations of emerging artists." ("Joan Snyder") Snyder unites the abstract, the representational and the personal through her pieces. Similar to Snyder, I use abstract techniques to create a message both to the audience, and to myself, of my recollection of the process of my trauma and recovery.

Tracey Emin also explores the confessional aspects of art and uses abstracted, yet still recognizable, images to express her message. Emin also employs text in pieces. "For Emin, the sound of text is very important, because 'you hear the voice of the person who wrote it or you hear your own voice reading it,'" (Clearwater 196). In contrast to how Snyder creates a language, Emin appropriates a previously defined language throughout her pieces. The viewer develops an internal dialogue with the artwork, and the confessional intimacy of Emin's work enables the viewer to examine Emin's pieces as if the pieces are directly from her personal diary.

"...[Emin's] neon works, with their intimate and cryptic messages, were like private notes written on paper and left on a table where they might be discovered, read, and understood by somebody she loves." (Clearwater 198) Emin makes herself extremely vulnerable through her work--she does not shy away from expressing her deepest thoughts, as seen in *Generic Children*, 1999. Emin publicized her most private musings, which causes the viewer to both humanize the artist and question their positionality in relation to Emin. Upon reading her first person confessions, the viewer empathizes with Emin's thoughts. The viewer then is forced to interpret their own experiences through the lens of Emin's work. Emin scribbled thoughts onto her work, suggesting she could not contain these thoughts inside her any longer. The intimacy of her art creates a

unique and unparalleled connection with the viewer, similar to how people feel bond through confiding in each other.

Many of Emin's pieces are inspired by traumatic events in her past. The exploration of trauma on a public stage turns the focus of Emin's art to past traumatic events and to her personal journey to recovery. "By writing about her rape and episodes of childhood abuse and abandonment, Emin aimed to purge herself of past traumas and self-destructive tendencies as a path toward reuniting with the divine creator." (Clearwater 198) By choosing to publicize these traumatic moments, Emin releases these memories and is no longer burdened by the trauma, isolation and loneliness felt after the events. In *From the Week of Hell '94*, 1994, Emin describes a period of her life in which she had dental work done, broke up with her boyfriend, and had an abortion. The scratchy, demonic poses and figuration allude to the idea that this piece was not artificial and overworked, but rather was emotionally demanding. Emin states:

"For me, aggression, sex and beauty go together. Much of my work has been about memory, for example, but memories of violence and pain. Nowadays if I make a drawing I'm trying to draw love, but love isn't always gentle Being an artist [...] it's some kind of communication, a message." (Manchester)

I drew from Emin's use of personal trauma as an inspiration, and the confessional nature of her art. I connected to Emin's exploration of intimate, personal, and not necessarily "acceptable" thoughts, and the sincerity of her pieces.

Abstract Expressionism allowed me to establish a language to express an unconscious exploration of my recovery. *Recovering: A Memoir* forced me to address repressed aspects of my recovery. This process at times causes me to relive traumas, inevitably forcing me to recover

while creating *Recovering: A Memoir*. The viewer gets a first hand look into my recovery as *Recovering: A Memoir* is not only representational, but also was made during my recovery process. In order to address this subtlety, I appropriate Abstract Expressionist styles to reflect the process of creating the piece and recovery. Displaying these pieces side by side sets them up to be read as a linear process, however I revisit color choice and painting technique in each piece to highlight the nonlinear aspect of recovery. *Recovering: A Memoir*, then, becomes the physical manifestation of this recovery process. It is necessary for women artists to center themselves and other women in a conversation in the male dominated art world, instead of shaping themselves into forms that the public deems acceptable. Women are often silenced and pressured to not take up space, especially when they are not acting as an object for the male gaze. Therefore, literally and theoretically taking up space through *Recovering: A Memoir*, a permanent, confessional expression of my experiences, is rebellious and an act of defiance to harmful pressures that women face.

The most prominent phases are conveyed in *Recovering: A Memoir*, such as guilt, anger, self doubt, resilience, depression, self hate, and self love. I create a language that helps convey the emotions felt--excess pigment running down the canvas show both time passing and lack of control, short strokes show impulse, long strokes show thoughtfulness and agony, blended colors display the confusion and inability to separate feelings and thoughts.

The validation and declaration of my experiences through *Recovering: A Memoir* declare my trauma and resulting recovery process as valid, deserving of space and recognition. Consequently, I confront what it means to be a woman artist, and what constitutes “acceptable” manners and spaces for women to exist in.

I express my trauma and recovery as physical entities, therefore concrete and undeniable. This is in response to the social and systemic pressures to silence women's expressions of their pain and voicing of their past traumas. There is a stigma surrounding women who demand to be heard as being "unladylike" and "unattractive," thus women artists who unapologetically express their past traumas begin to normalize a conversation around trauma, recovery, and the ways we treat people who are recovering from trauma. This conversation begins through languages created through art and continue into social and political dialogue.



Tell My Sister, 2012



Untitled, 1959

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