

THANK YOU/RECOGNITION

Hello! Thank you, Eriko.

Thank you everyone for taking the time and space to chat with me and for supporting local art!

I'm excited to be here with you and grateful that small mall invited me to host a living room session though I am currently in my bedroom. But if you don't know Small Mall, check them out! Small Mall and Casey Droege Cultural Productions both do amazing work supporting local Pittsburgh artists and they have a great selection of artwork for sale.

I thought I'd start by introducing myself while I share some images of explorations in painting and other past work and then I'll spend most of my time discussing my current project head.hands.heart and it's various components.

And before I get started I just wanted to share that I will be mentioning suicide and self-harm but only briefly and not in any detail.

INTRO

So taking a step back, my name is Mak. My pronouns are she/they and I've been around for 27 years. And it wasn't until these past few years that I began to really see myself as an artist as I came to understand, and find language for, the ways in which I experience and interact with the world. I don't call myself an artist to make any sort of declaration, but I think more than anything, identifying as an artist continuously helps me to find and build community which is at times life-savingly important to me.

I've come to identify the way in which I engage with the world as equally experimental and creative and both of these contemplative and expressive practices are tools that I use to process and understand experiences, primarily difficult experiences. My own as well as those of others. And sometimes this feels like a kind of quest and I wonder if my exploration take me right back where I started. Which means it's a good thing that I enjoy the process of making more than the product.

MISREMEMBERINGS/Beginning of exploring reflective making

Which takes me to my first and only solo exhibition. This is an image of three works from misrememberings which I exhibited in the Urban Tree gallery back in 2018.

Misrememberings was my first formal exploration into making as a means of experimentation. This series of abstract watercolor paintings and the corresponding writings were made as I was reflecting the loss of someone close to me. She died by suicide, and though none of the work directly communicates this, I was deeply affected by this decision of hers and I wanted to better understand it.

This experience also made me reconsider and reflect on a lot of my own past trauma and so I was able to more broadly explore ideas of memory, recall, disorientation, and managing madness through this creative process of painting and writing. I considered

these somewhat dark and troubled memories from a bright, youthful perspective, I took a pragmatic approach to understanding dissociative amnesia which is the inability to recall memories that is often caused by trauma or stress. I was really interested in the connection between dissociative amnesia and creativity and in general the familiar relationship between mental illness and creativity which I feel is unfortunately all too romanticized.

And though this process of making misrememberings was a very emotional one, I found myself oscillating between getting lost in the pain of it and also finding grounding in research and in reading academic papers. And upon reflection this is when I began to learn how to hold both experimentation and expression in balance. Recognizing that one is not greater than the other and that they can work in relationship with each other.

HUMANS

One way that I've found I can hold research and art or research and design in balance is by situating myself or situating humans in the work. And by this I don't mean human-centered design but rather an acknowledgment of myself/yourself in the work.

If you've ever had to write a research paper for school, you might be familiar with writing in the third person or not stating your own personal experiences in an academic paper. And this is a bit frustrating at times because it's difficult for me to imagine a way where you can fully remove yourself from something you're writing or creating. We all carry implicit bias and I feel this will come through regardless so why not be transparent about your presence. And maybe this is just a personal preference but this is something that I've worked on relearning. This idea that I am allowed to be here and take up space.

These images are photographs taken by my friend and collaborator Freddy Foote. He was interested in exploring the technique of Painting with light and was inspired by Gjon Mili's photographs of Picasso.

I really loved the movement in this project and the way that the light is capturing the mirrored memory of movement from the original painting.

This project was led by Freddy but in a lot of ways it encompasses concepts that I'm interested in exploring further and have slowly begun to experiment with. That being memory, movement, interaction with oneself and the space around them and freedom of expression.

HHH

Which brings us to project head.hands.heart.

Project head.hands.heart is my ongoing exploration into the reciprocal relationships that form the connective tissue between the head, hands, heart, and each of their sensory extensions. I think of this project kind of as the porous membrane that loosely contains my research. But this also includes creative exploration as well.

And as I wrote in the introduction of my thesis paper, these topics are best explored slowly, with an open mind, self-reflective curiosity, and deep breaths. Feeling your feet on the ground and the weight of your body in the world, I invite you to inhale fully. exhale, and take note of your senses.

Throughout this project, I'm considering sensory perception sensitivities due to embodied trauma and I'm exploring how a biophilic approach to soft architecture might allow for free expression while alleviating destructive behaviours. There is a lot of jargon in there so I will unpack that. I can share more simply that this project is asking how the built environment - which can be thought of as any human-made environment that sets the stage for life - influences human sensory perception - how we process stimuli in the environment through our senses - with the aim to better understand the entanglement of self-destructive and self-expressive behaviors.

I'll briefly share my understandings of self-destruction and self-expression before sharing a few of the existing creative components of this project so far.

These two concepts are key tensions that hold this project together. To me, self-destruction is when someone actively takes away from themselves or their power. Eating disorders, cutting, alcoholism, drug abuse and suicidal thoughts are all self-destructive acts and of course there are many more and they may be deeply intimate. And what its continually illuminated for me are the connections between self-destructive acts and self-expression. I'd like to read a quote by Zadie Smith because she defines an intimate tragedy as a self-destructive act due to a lack of freedom of expression or freedom of true and full identity.

Smith writes, "Impossible identities are too often resolved in violence. The rope inside us is pulled so taught, strung between such apparently incompatible places that we feel we must cut it. Most often this violence is internal. We kill some part of ourselves. . . we cut that bit out and live in a mutilated way. That is an intimate tragedy."

And though Smith is speaking more to identity, I feel her description of an intimate tragedy quite beautifully describes the relationship I am exploring.

LINDA

I suppose I should introduce the magical human that you have been watching dance about on the screen. This is my dear friend Linda. And I had a very special invitation from Linda to collaborate on this project that we might be able to call bodywork.

Linda's story is not mine to tell, but we both found that our interests in this project tightly aligned with one another. These photos were taken by Freddy Foote and I painted the shapes and marks on Linda.

Painting these marks was a way to illuminate and study our interactions with each other. I was studying my interactions with myself, my interactions with Linda, and our collective interactions with the space. These interactions illuminate the relationships between ourselves, others, and the environment around us.

There is also an interesting physical exchange in this particular project as well as in interactions such as handshakes, handholds, and other soft and caring touchings. Paint was just a way to make visible these marks that we're all making on each other in every interaction we have.

What I really appreciated about this project is that it gave us a way to think about the physical body and its sensory organs, as an interface between the central nervous system and the environment.

ANDRE

I'd also like to introduce André! I had the opportunity to work with and paint on Andre in a slightly different capacity in that this was in part a photoshoot for furniture that my friend, Ryan Cohn, designed and built. But even though the project invitation was slightly different, the experience of working so closely and intimately with someone inspired a lot of the same reflections about reciprocal interaction.

I'm going to shift slightly before wrapping up here and share a little about where I see this project going. Seeing this image after the photos of Andre might look like a stark contrast but to me these are both part of project head.hands.heart.

So I've spoken a lot about sensory perception, self-destruction, self-expression, the built environment, and all of these reciprocal relationships that we are apart of and all of this to me, this background research, is setting the stage for future designs. I've spent time collecting information and experiences to make sure that I'm asking the right questions and directing this work with care.

This brings me to the design component which I envision as living both architecturally and potentially as product designs. My aim is to create conditions of possibility in a world filled with hard architecture that represents oppressive structures that limit freedom of expression. I find that soft architecture invites the human imprint and free-expression. Soft architecture reflects the presence of human beings and other living organisms. And I think one of the most successful forms of soft architecture is biophilic

design. What is more facilitating of reciprocity than a living environment - a living counterpart.

So this a product design for a living lamp that was built with moss, led lights, and motion sensors. I'm currently working on designing artifacts and spaces that incorporate living materials and invite inhabitants to touch and interact. This also creates opportunities for greater control over the environment. I'm looking at using living plants in combination with capacitive touch sensors will offer the opportunity to control sound, light, and other environmental factors that are detected through our human senses.

Something that really excites me about this concept is the tactile nature of living materials and the shift away from designing for the gaze. When designing with only sight in mind, this can lead to limiting accessibility as well as limiting the potential for connections between different sense modalities to bloom. And I'm calling this freedom of sensation, perceptual emancipation.

So I'm going to end there and I'd be happy to take any questions and additionally I have questions for you all if you feel like sharing. Mostly I'm curious to hear if any of you have any sensory perception sensitivities that you're open to sharing and also if you've found any environments or qualities of environments that make you feel safe and free to express fully?

Thank you!