

Everything is Overwhelming

Tori Taylor

Pacific Northwest College of Art

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I have had a really hard time figuring out what to say about this project. It's something I care deeply about, and put all of myself into. In the last few weeks at PNCA, I found myself coming to school with a sore body from spending the whole day in numerous strange positions while painting whether that be laying on the floor, or hunched over for hours. This painting received everything I had to give. I wanted what I said about it to do it justice. Discussing it like this also feels like exactly the opposite of its point. I made this piece hoping for it to act as a mirror, for viewers not to wonder what meaning I bring to it, but bring their own meaning, fill in their own life, and see themselves in it. So with that in mind I am going to try my best to talk about my side of this painting, without defining it for others.

I started PNCA strictly doing detailed and colorful portraits. I had done them so much that they felt really limiting, like that was all I could really do at the time. Sophomore year I entered my first painting class here at PNCA, and on the first day the teacher told us to leave the painter we believed we were at the door. I took those words to heart, because I knew it was something I needed. My art changed drastically in that class. With packed paintings of figures, fruits, organs, gems, and car crashes. It was so different from what I was doing, and it made me feel like there were an endless amount of things I could make. It was freeing. I became a completely different kind of painter. During my junior year, I took another painting class while the pandemic was still raging. After getting access to studio space at school, I came in and painted some work that led me to what I am making today. I depicted unconventional women, with a layer of highlights over the top of them, distorting them. I knew it would look interesting and bring me somewhere new, but upon finishing them I was shocked by how abstract they turned out. I never thought I would make any sort of abstract work, and was fixated on packing my composition with detail and realism and it felt like there was just no room for it in my

practice. Those pieces changed my brain a bit and made me see the value of abstraction. I suppose if you make art long enough, things naturally start to break apart, and I was excited to play with that more.

This work was made thinking about the experiences, psychology, and neuroscience behind trauma. In the book *The Body Keeps Score*, trauma expert Bessel Vander Kolk explains the ways in which trauma is processed. When we experience trauma it affects our behavior and perception as well as the types of things we are drawn to. Often the brain becomes fixated on distress and seems to compulsively recreate the original event or events of trauma. (Kolk, 2005) When someone has experienced something like this it changes the way their brain reacts to future threats. The amygdala is one area in which we interpret a threat. It acts quickly to keep us safe, however, it often interprets danger before we consciously notice what it is interpreting. Our



frontal lobes are also responsible for perceiving a threat, they use a slower more effective process. When the frontal lobes try to decipher if we are in danger or not, it takes its time processing the possible threat and makes out what it is. This response in our brain is something that could be activated when we would look up in a dark room and mistake a chair for a monster. Trauma complicates this process, the brain becomes more prone to process stimuli as dangerous. This makes the world into a more confusing place than it already was, with things flickering between threatening and safe.

(Kolk, 2015)

I proposed to explore how our brain processes trauma and interprets danger through one large-scale oil painting. I wanted the canvas to be around 66 by 90 inches. Oil paint was my medium of choice for its ability to blend and depict things like flesh with more ease, and its buttery quality. I thought the ideas would be best depicted in one large painting rather than multiple pieces because if I were to make multiple works, the ideas I want to come across would become more confusing. One painting allows me to express themes of trauma more directly. I wanted the work to have a packed composition, filled with imagery, and energy as something unfolds in every corner. I also wanted to fill the piece with chaotic subject matter, such as snakes, figures, organs, and skeletons. I use the line between abstraction and representation to help mirror our brain's way of interpreting danger, and so new threats will appear throughout the piece. Pastel colors create a sense of tension by contrasting the content of the work. To show the painting I plan to create a space that elevates the themes of the work. I would light only the painting so that it is clear and have the room either dark or filled with red light, and play the



sound of a heartbeat over speakers. These added elements would extend the painting beyond the ends of the canvas, and set a tone immediately when the audience enters the space.

I created a practice painting in the semester leading up to thesis surrounding the ideas I was thinking about. It wasn't the painting I wanted to end up with, but it held important information that would help me develop the final piece. The colors in the painting came naturally, I found that pastel colors helped create tension with the subject matter I was addressing. It was also a way to create a sense of comfort in the viewer before they saw the reality of the work. What I struggled with most in making it was figuring out what subject matter



to use. Everything I put in felt forced. I could put different imagery throughout the piece, but I couldn't figure out how to fit it together or elaborate on it. The figures felt wrong as well, their fleshy quality and bright pink skin worked, but they felt too casual. This painting helped me figure out what direction I needed to go, and more importantly what issues I would be facing.

I had a few questions in my line of inquiry: How do those affected by trauma and not affected by trauma differ? Does our impulse to recreate our trauma come through in what imagery we are drawn to? Can we find some sort of comfort in disturbing imagery? I wanted to explore the feeling of trauma, the different reactions of those with and without trauma to grotesque subject matter, as well as the two ways in which the brain processes danger due to trauma. The questions I was asking were important in the making, but matter less now. I am no longer theorizing what the work should be asking, but interpreting what it is doing. Are viewers able to see their own lives within the piece? That is what matters most now, especially since I personally believe that everyone has some sort of trauma, whether that be nationally, socially, or personally experienced. I wanted this to be a bit of an experiment, and I wouldn't get all of the answers I was looking for until showing the work, and talking to those who came.

For this piece I knew some elements that I wanted. Abstracted figures and objects mingling together. I started by making a lot of studies of figures and hands. I drew them in charcoal and painted over them in oil paint. Abstracting figures in drawing came easily to me since I had been doing it prior, but I wasn't sure how to transfer those mark-making techniques over to paint. Those studies informed me, but they were very far from the figures I ended up making. Once I felt worried enough and ready enough, I started the outline for the painting, filling the bottom with what I had worked on the most, figures. I had references from books and old Baroque paintings for poses, and started by layering figures on top of each other. This was different than how I had been abstracting figures before, where I had been repeating the same marks as I moved around different poses. Something I struggled with was exactly what subject matter to put in this piece. I went about solving this in a few different ways. The first was by sending out a survey for any PNCA student to fill out. I asked ten questions, the most important

being: Do you believe everyone experiences trauma? Do you find you are attracted to media others may find unattractive? What Imagery comes to mind when you think of trauma? And What do you feel when your trauma is triggered? I got 64 responses. 63% of people believed that everyone has experienced trauma, and 84% said that they were attracted to imagery others may find unattractive, and 96% said that they themselves experienced trauma. I used the responses to figure out what feelings and imagery to use in the piece.



For the question of what imagery came to mind, I got varied responses. These were some common themes: things that reminded them of family, men, darkness, chaos, weapons, emptiness, blurred abstract movements, eyes and teeth. Some of these are staggered throughout.

For the question of “what do you feel when your trauma is triggered,” responses were very similar to each other: the most common response being shame. Other common responses were panic and fear.

The majority of the responses I received were focused within the body, which caused me to hit a bit of a wall. I didn’t want the piece to be fully figurative. If it was, it wouldn’t have had the feeling that I was trying to achieve. This caused me to do something I was avoiding, use my own imagery. I was distancing myself from the subject matter by referencing things that were purely scientific, but that was also limiting the work. I thought that putting any fraction of myself into it would make it too specific and unrelatable. It was a step I needed to take, to make it fun and scary and existing inbetween.

I hung up a large piece of paper to brainstorm my own imagery in relation to trauma. I made lists and decided which things fit and which didn’t. To my surprise, the people who looked at it said those specific features made it more relatable. It was something for the viewer to grasp onto and make their own decisions about. This was a big moment for me, and a big shift in the piece, it was starting to get the feeling I was going for and I got really excited. With midterm reviews speeding towards us, I rushed to finish the outline of my painting. This was a new experience for me. Usually in making a piece I depict bit by bit, connect them, bounce off of them, and complete it. Having an actual map to follow and then add detail to was valuable for the feat of making a massive painting in just a few months. It required me to have to make less decisions all at once. I wasn’t thinking about color, depth, texture, and realism. I just needed to complete a good composition that had a successful flow. When the outline was all done, I thought the hardest part was over, but I was incredibly wrong. Looking at this huge painting with everything mapped out knowing that adding color and depth was next I had no idea how to start.

There was so much going on and I wasn't sure what direction to head in. To simplify things for myself I started with pinks and reds and filled in the figures. The shapes I was creating to overlap and fill out the seas of figures began to feel similar to my drawing process, in the packing and layering methods that I used. Once those were far enough along I could figure out how to incorporate other colors and textures. A lot of the process is bouncing off of pre-existing elements to make a balanced composition.



The painting is around 6 feet tall and 8 and half feet wide. It's divided into two canvases, but to me the work is one piece. I had planned on making this all on one canvas, but given that I live in a small one bedroom apartment, that would have been a terrible idea for storing later on. When I am given the opportunity to do whatever I want, I often jump in and go all out. The sizes of my canvases have been growing, but I never had the chance to make something this big



before. To me, large paintings are immersive, they tower over you, intimidate you, and pull you in. It was important to the piece and I believe it works better than many smaller paintings would with this subject matter given that just like this canvas, trauma can feel over-arching and confronting. Maximalism is another important element of this work, packed compositions always leave me in awe. I have been making work with compositions that mostly exist on one layer, stuffed with repetitive imagery, so this wasn't exceptionally far off for me in this project. It feels overwhelming, in a way that I love and lends itself well to the subject of trauma. I broke the figures down and constructed them by combining detailed areas with fleshy shapes, developing a visual language for certain parts of the body. The figures work in three different ways. Nudity exists as a representation for vulnerability. I depicted them in a way to mimic the feelings that are within the body when trauma is triggered, energy in the arms, dissociation, and scattered vision. Most importantly they act as an entryway for the viewer. They are meant to act as a vessel to hold you, within the work you become the figures, navigating the things existing around you. There is imagery that only exists once within the work, the scissors, dagger, keys, spider, ice cream, rabbit, and pierced ear to name a few. The lack of repetition makes these items hold



weight. There is imagery that may be seen as threatening or calming within the piece. To

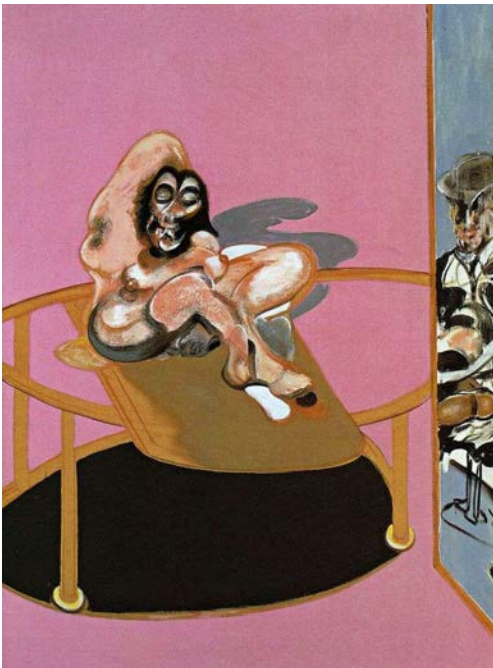
me the objects can be deceiving; the spider could be a symbol of danger and fear to one person, and be comforting and relatable to another. The ice cream which may bring a sweet memory, can represent something menacing or sad. These objects are up for the viewer to interpret as good or bad, and any interpretation is good and okay. The reason walking the line between representation and abstraction works well in this piece is because it can work a bit like a Rorschach test, our brain will interpret what isn't clear, by using our own experiences. I use pastel colors and shiny highlights as a method to bring the viewer in, the pretty glossy nature of the piece invites you to confront harsh subject matter. Flowers and plants cascade over the top and throughout. I coupled this piece with elements of installation. I grew up going to the Walker Art Museum a lot, and always loved when work was displayed without just being hung on the wall. Installation can be used as a tool to extend the world of the painting into our world. I wanted people's feelings to shift right when they walked in the room, before even seeing the painting. Red lights emulate danger, and the sound of a heart beat mimicking the way your heart may feel when trauma is triggered. To me trauma feels a lot like what the past few years have felt like. Chaos, anxiety, and confusion covered the world like a veil, and within that we had to continue somehow with

normal life: doing work, interacting with friends, finding ways to cope. When you have trauma it can feel like this all the time, impending doom mixed with extreme beauty, danger and comfort existing together. This painting is meant to be a bit confusing, and some parts may be impossible to figure out. The way that suffering and pleasure co-exists is confusing to navigate. It can be hard to decipher what is good and what is bad and what will hurt you, and this is even harder to do when you are set up to believe that everything could hurt you.



Throughout painting I hit many road-blocks, unsure of what move to make next. In those moments of uncertainty I turned to artists whose aesthetics were similar to the type of look I was trying to achieve. I thought of my problems, and looked for how others solved them in their work. Pure and full abstraction still felt like a reach for me. I looked towards Cecily Brown, a painter I truly admire, who walks the line between abstraction and representation. Upon first glance her compositions look like Abstract Expressionism, brushstrokes exploding on a canvas. The more you look, the more the paintings reveal pieces of themselves to you, and what begins to unfold are fields and fields of beautiful and strange figures. This moved me. Cecily is quoted saying “One of the main things I would like my work to do is to reveal itself slowly and

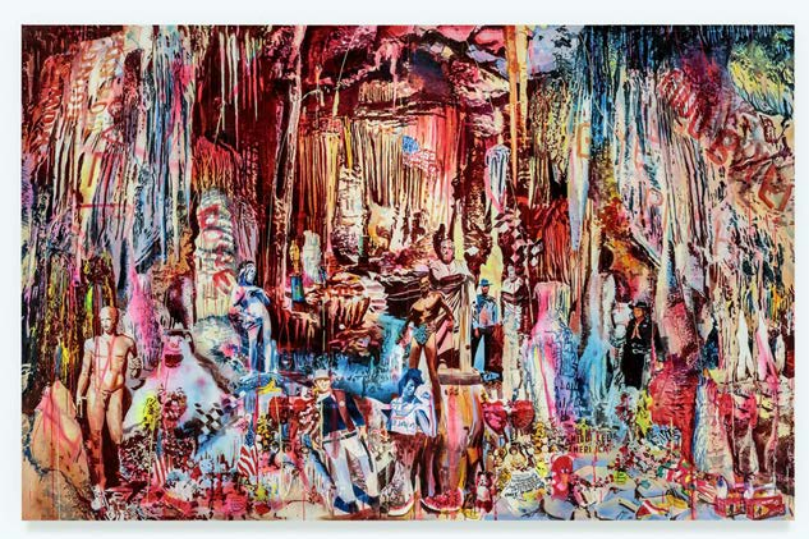
continuously and for you to never really feel like you are finished with looking at something.” (Brown, 2020) I wanted this effect, but on my own terms. The painting I made is a perfect step into that direction for me. It is more towards the side of representation, but with ambiguity and detail existing and creating tension with each other. The detail gives the viewer something to make sense of in a mess of things that may not make sense. Brown spoke of having a language of brushstrokes to mean one thing or another, and can portray an ear, arm, vulva, from the back of her mind. She also spoke about having drawings spread about the floor and letting them seep in when they needed to. I tried to do the same, covering the walls and floors of my studio with studies. I wanted to have the same effect in the work I made, coming out with an amorphous blob of figures and things.



Francis Bacon creates paintings that bring a feeling of unease. His work often uses distortion and minor abstraction to make bodies and faces look unsettling. How Bacon handles his brush in his pieces feeds that feeling, the use of texture, as well as a palette of pinks and reds, that display the blood under the skin. Looking at his work you can see large confident brushstrokes in the middle of a face or figure that functions by both informing and distorting the figure. Throughout the making of my painting I started to use this technique of his. A thick application of paint making a flat but textured body part that mixed with the more detailed parts

of the piece to create a more dynamic painting. His work is something that I attempted to reference to create a sense of unease in my work.

I was looking at the artist Rosson Crow, a painter who makes large pieces with packed compositions. She uses a palette that is often filled with pastel pinks, blues, and greens. She had many paintings where the key colors were reds and pinks, but the other colors evened them out.



Both her busy composition and use of color relate to the inviting yet disturbing feelings I wanted to come across in my work.

This painting is how I perceive the world around me.

As someone with their own

personal trauma, I have such a hard time figuring out how to navigate with it. Every day has instances of fear, anger, confusion, and work. Deciphering what is safe and what is dangerous feels nearly impossible. Its moments like jumping when someone casually runs by me, feeling defensive in interactions that are actually positive, small moments feel like large attacks, minor annoyances can feel like everything is falling apart, I bend myself often to not stir others, and face anxiety when my attempts at moving around and for others fail. Sometimes clarity can never be reached, and I often fear that a mis-step on my part will end with losing everything. This isn't to say all parts of life are horrible and scary, but that mechanisms that kept you safe at a time, can make the good things in life harder to keep in mind. Like the people who responded to my survey, I can often feel shame around these feelings, and that is incredibly unfortunate.

Struggling with trauma or mental health shouldn't be shameful. What I have experienced personally and what I have watched those around me experience has given me passion for psychology and issues relating to mental health.

To me this work is incredibly successful; I have immense feelings of pride and love for this painting. It gives the feelings that come with trauma a form, and acts as a vessel to understanding those feelings. It can be hard to have a language for mental health, it is something that you have to learn, but images can always hold what words may fail to. This painting does not just act as an ending point of my education, but a step towards my future work. Moving forward I plan to explore more abstraction, more chaos, more crazy mark making, ambiguity mixed with detail, explorations in mental health, neuroscience, and psychology. I want to paint large, and explore abstraction and packed canvases with a plethora of subject matter. I am going to grad school to become a therapist, and learn how to merge mental health work with art. It bridges the gap between my background and my future.

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