Residu(e/al)

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

This is a personal narrative, one that has influenced an entire body of work created over the past few years, culminating in drawings, installations, paintings and collections. Steeped in languages of the subconscious, domesticity, grief and body fragmentation, my practice is a representation of the intuitive process.
Dedication

To my mother Helen, who taught me how to
“pull myself up from my boot straps” and
who dedicated her life to make mine better.
Acknowledgments

To Suzanne, Pheoris and Carmel for your guidance and understanding during this entire process. You have helped me more than you will ever know.

To Ian for your unconditional love and support.

To Denise for sheltering me from the storm.

To everyone I have met along the way and who has helped me to get to this point in my life.
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Fields of Study

Major Field:  Art
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Introduction

My work is the evidence of residue. A residue that exists from a childhood less ordinary, steeped in the quietness of secrecy and abuse, from cycles and questions unanswered. It is a representation of interior and intuitive spaces such as memory and psychological states, seeping forth from remembering but wanting to forget, often times cloaking itself in the playfulness of imagery. As I am not the only one who has gone through these experiences, my work alludes not only to personal experience but to a larger universal experience as well that takes time to understand and to absorb. Some moments are not easily digestible and some moments are written from the perspective of a 5 year old trying to understand. Some of these memories an amalgamation of years due to the existence of repression and the foggy presence of time.

All of my work acts as a healer, a narrative, a history of a past that is remembered in fragments. I create objects and images that allow for me to tell this story without giving away too much. Some things being better left unsaid and some things being better left unspoken. I have sewn and wrapped, bandaged and revealed, stuffed and emptied trying to fill a void or create a new one only to fill it again. I am interested in the languages of the materials I have utilized, both two dimensional and three dimensional, languages such as domesticity, the interior, body fragmentation and perception, loss, grief, psychology and so many others. Above all I am interested in the intuitive nature of
creating and the revelations that come with the territory. I am introvert by nature. The fly
on the wall. The observer.
Chapter 1: Just Ever So Slightly Out of Season

My aunt Merle, on my father's side, lived in Jackson Ohio. We would go there on occasion, driving through the countryside. Thick trees so full that they seemed to engulf the road ahead, lined either side as we went driving by. They lived in the middle of nowhere. Somewhere I wasn't accustomed too. The next door neighbors at least a mile away. The one thing that I remember the most was feeling a sense of guilt for the modern amenities that we had at home. They used an outhouse. Wooden seat surrounded by wooden slats and a wooden roof overhead. You had to walk to the back yard to use it. Everything else looking worn out, stained and pissed on. Their whole family came from southern Ohio. In the “hollers” as my mother would call it. I don't remember much about that side of the family. I haven't spoken to them in at least 20 years. I wouldn't recognize them from any other stranger.

But although we lived in town (in Lancaster, Ohio) and had a porcelain toilet, we didn't have much either. Rummaging through musty discarded clothing and going to the food pantry, we did what we could to stay afloat. I remember the pantry. The sense of shame that you could feel emanating from all of the single mothers and poor families that were looking for handouts because the weekly check couldn't cut it. There was a flame logo on the front of the glass door that matched my height. Lining the shelves were cereal boxes and unwanted test market products donated because the grocery stores could not get it to sell. You didn’t have much choice as to what your next dinner or breakfast was
going to be. They filled the bags and handed them over, accompanied with a gallon of milk and a carton of eggs if you were lucky. What the pantry couldn't supply the food stamps would. There were also thanksgiving dinners in brown paper sacks that would be delivered to our front door. Frozen turkey, cans of vegetables, a bag or box of potatoes.

I learned my collecting habits then. To save everything and waste nothing. To spend fifty cents on a t-shirt instead of five dollars. I still love the thrift store or at least have learned to love it. Actually, I have an unhealthy obsession. It harbors a connection to the past. The smell of other lives lived. The worn surfaces of objects from their years of use. The patterns and prints outdated but crafted so much more skillfully. The sense of nostalgia. I remember the moment when thrifting became popular or at least it didn't hold as much of a stigma as it did when I was growing up. It was in high school and again in college. I would go back years later as a substitute teacher after swearing to never step foot in those halls again. Walking through the crowds of adolescent teens I would overhear them referring to Salvation Army as Sal-Vo. I felt violated. I felt as though they didn't earn their stripes, so to speak, as to fully appreciate wearing what wasn't originally theirs. To stand out in those prints and patterns that were just ever so slightly out of season.
Illustration 1. Untitled. Photo by Sara Kathleen Berens.
Chapter 2: Counselor

My mother took me to a counselor once. I uneasily shifted in the waiting room as I filled out a yellow piece of paper that I knew was questioning my mental stability. I had to think about the questions as my hand shakily moved across the page, jarring the wooden clip board up and down as I wrote. It asked about my body image, numbers 1-10, medical history, all of the normal questions I suppose for a counselor’s office but much more private than I was used too. I absolutely hated it and refused to go back after my first visit. I wasn’t used to divulging, to talking about what had happened. Years later in college I found myself back in the same position. Taking a class that was to aide in finding my path. One of the requirements was to make an appointment with a school counselor. So I went. Cramped in a tiny room with the door shut, blinds drawn. I ended up needing to leave because I felt intimidated, my face wet as I tried to choke down a drink of water. Needless to say, I went for another visit or two under their advice but stopped returning after awhile.

But I found something spiritual and healing about creating that has taken the place of “talking it out”. It never mattered what it was: coloring book pages, craft kits, drawings or sewing. I loved it all and it has all crept into my work in some form or another. Many of these materials acting as a place for meditation, threading a needle in
the same continuous motion or feeling the fluidity of graphite on paper. There exists a place where it is alright to breath, to let it out.

As a child I was what you would call a latch key kid and the craft kits that my mother would buy for me kept my hands busy after school. Craft kits and television. To this day I still have a tendency to work on projects in front of the t.v. The ribbons/bandages for the work *b(a/o)ndage* were assembled watching television. I had to repaint my coffee table from the mess it made.
When I was about 5, I begged my sister to put me on the handle bars of her bike. I wouldn't take no for an answer as I stomped my feet on the ground. I just wanted so badly to ride around our apartment complex with the older girls. To get a sense of freedom from the plastic kitchen and dinette set that had been procured from the side of a Salvation Army donation box. She finally agreed but forgot one simple detail. As we were riding around the cracked pavement of the complex with her friend Alicia, my foot slipped down towards the gears and chain of the bike. The previous day my father had been working on the chain and forgot to replace the guard. As my foot swept down my skin met with the grinding metal and my toe was almost completely cut off, save for one tiny thread of skin. My sister had forgotten to put my shoes on my feet. There would be a 30 min ride from Lancaster to Columbus Ohio because the hospital would not life flight my tiny body for lack of insurance and I would return home with an un-bendable, re-attached toe and a permanent metal rod in my foot as a souvenir.
Although I cannot fill in all of the details of that day, it has played a major role in the usage of the addition and subtraction of body parts within my work. It has led me to become interested in utilizing the figure in odd combinations and fragments not only for its partial existence but for its associations with mental capacities. In an essay by Jacqueline Lichtenstine she states, “If we now bring together all the various elements of the definition, we see that the fragment is a category that shares some properties with other categories, such as those of symbol, fetish, relic, or trace.” (1). The fragment exists not only as a piece of the larger whole but as a symbolic gesture of the psyche or memory. Forms such as prosthetics, severed body parts, the extended and posed body, all have played a major role in my work and relate to the historical utilization of fragmentation by artists such as Gericault and Van Gogh (2). The difference is the language by which the fragment is extended to the viewer. Theirs is by way of classical beauty and forms and mine by way of contemporary illustration and visual languages.

Two artists who have heavily influenced my practice, Louise Bourgeois and Hans Bellmer, also utilized the language of the fragment within their work. As with so many others it was through Bellmer that I became interested in the language of the doll. It harbors a certain innocence that I related to the hand-drawn illustrations that graced the cover of my birthday cards sent from my father. Although Bellmer was interested in the
doll for its allusions to innocence, he was also interested in its uncanny and highly sexualized nature. There is a sinister feeling to his photographs and drawings that touches one thing that we all share, the unconscious. In a publication that was written subsequently with an exhibition of Bellmer’s work, the author states, “And so it was that the desires of the unconscious came into the realm of sexuality—not by way of the body, but by way of the mind. The mind presumably fueled the body just as the unconscious motivated the language of surrealism.” (3). The unconscious or the intuitive have always had to exist for the creation of art. Art is the physical representation of the unconscious and just as Bellmer, my work has always been motivated and informed by it.

Louise Bourgeois’ work is also a product of the unconscious or subconscious mind spilling forth from her personal narrative. Having a turbulent past as a child, her work is a representation of those experiences as well as her psyche. In a survey of her work Robert Storr states:

“Nevertheless, the content of her art is not primarily autobiographical but archetypal, an astonishingly rich, nuanced, sometimes alarming, often funny and almost always startling fusion of classical personifications of human passions and terror, Symbolist variations on them, Freudian reinterpretations of both, and direct or indirect transcription of her own unblinking glimpses into the murkiest waters of the psyche.” (4)

Those murky waters are where I make a connection between her and me. We both dive into the memories and thoughts that have graced the past. A week before her death I had the opportunity to watch the documentary based on her life, Louise Bourgeois: The
Spider, The Mistress, and the Tangerine. I remember watching her speak about her father and her lips shakily trying to get the words out. Even at 98 years old she still cried. I had to stop myself from doing the same in that moment and when I read the news that she had passed.

Body Fragmentation came into my work as a simple statement by editing out the iris of the eye and leaving only the pupil. Even then I found that the simplest shift in the human form can create peculiar results that question our sense of normality. Upon the start of my graduate studies I swapped the figure for small sewn components that came together to form larger installations, fragments of a different sort, but fragments none the less. These pieces, usually created from stained found fabric, never really had the power of imagery that the human figure does and so I returned to it. The figure has a power and familiarity, complications, comparisons, and social/psychological readings. Through employing it in small drawings and larger installations I am able to create an intimate experience as well as a bodily comparison to the work and the human forms being utilized.

Body fragmentation within my practice comes from a multitude of editing processes such as erasure, graphite and image transfers/projections. I am interested in the ability of editing to allow me to “play” with the original sources such as medical and instructional illustrations, like Red Cross first aid manuals and how-to books. I find that in these sources there exists a dis-connect between how we perceive our own bodies to the images of bodies within these texts. Malformation, illness, dismembered limbs and
convulsions question our senses of the human figure and can start to conjure up ideas of
the psychological, the alienated and otherness. Body fragmentation in how-to books
operates on the same level because of the demonstrative arms and hands that exist
without the rest of the body.

The fragmented figure also has an ability to act as a signifier for fragmented
memory, allowing the viewer to fill in the pieces. Within a series of small scale drawings,
I utilized this spatial questioning to create a perpetuating sense of confusion and clarity.
With work alluding to my personal narrative I see these drawings acting as my memory
does with vast expanses needing to be filled in by others. Even though these works exist
on paper typically no larger than eight inches, there is a thought process involved with
viewing the work that opens up this vastness. We are left to wonder where these arms and
hands are coming from, where they are now residing, and to whom do they belong. I find
that this sense of continual questioning is also one that exists as I am left to re-create and
wonder about my past. There have been days with countless hours being spent searching
for the answers and imagining what was or what might have been.
Illustration 2. …that binds. Photo by Sara Kathleen Berens.

Illustration 4. All Together Now. Photo by Sara Kathleen Berens.

Illustration 5. Coming Together or Falling Apart. Photo by Sara Kathleen Berens.
Chapter 5: Correspondence

I carry with me, tucked away of course, a box that contains the majority of the conversations that I had with my father growing up. Inside this box are the letters that I sent to him telling him all of the mundane workings of my school day. I still have his figure drawing book from the courses that he took and the observational drawings of a very pregnant and very naked Demi Moore as well as drawings from school pictures of my sister and myself. For the most part these are seemingly normal except for the inmate number that was written on all of the letters that I received until I was 13 years old when my father was released from prison. A few years later he passed away from leukemia after having a bone marrow transplant and catching pneumonia from a weakened immune system. I would never really have to a chance to know him except through correspondence. What sticks out the most are the elaborate, hand crafted birthday cards with illustrations of cartoon characters that graced the cover. I usually cannot recall what the letters say by memory, but I can remember those illustrations. Although I never really knew if these were drawn by my father or by some other convict, I was always enamored with these cards for the careful line work of the artist.
Chapter 6: Lessons

I had lessons in everything. Girl scouts, 4-H, dance classes, piano classes, ceramics classes. I never stayed interested too long in one particular subject as I would move through learning cake decorating, sewing, drawing, pirouettes. In a way I felt that my mother was trying to make up for lost time once my father went to prison, to try and make the best out of a bad situation. I always felt guilty for the amount of money that was being spent on some of these lessons. At my age my brother and sister were not given so much and we were barely reaching poverty level. I was always consider the brat, the one who got the most because our lives got better and my mother was able to provide more with a full time job.

I imagine the dance lessons were to make me more graceful or maybe to gain a sense of confidence. Maybe it worked, maybe it didn't but I always felt awkward doing it. I was always taller than the other girls, quieter, chunkier. I could never quite make the jumps as gracefully. The costumes that we wore were always skin tight and gaudy. On occasion I would have to dance alone. In routines conjured up by some middle age woman who cared more about herself than her dance students. She would write herself into our group routines often times pushing our age bracket up at competition. I was her assistant for awhile, teaching younger girls jazz routines. It helped to offset the cost of the
lessons, costumes and fees of regional and national competition and the leather straps for shoes needed for “lyrical” dance.

Chapter 7: Intestinal Fortitude

By the time I was an early teen I was washing my own laundry. I never separated anything. I would just cram as much clothing as I could into the washer so it would be done. My mother worked a full time job as we were growing up and had her hands full with three children by herself. There was never a lot of anything but she did the best she could. We ate a lot of fast food and wore just as much hand me downs that typically came from my mother's nine brothers and sisters who were much better off. Arguments would break out between my sister and myself over who got what out of those giant trash bags full of gently used clothing, everything being from mall stores and ordered from catalogs. The majority of my family are females save for one cousin and my uncles, so my brother usually wasn't in on these arguments. But as much as my sister and I would fight, I confided in her. I looked up to her.

There were times throughout my upbringing that my sister became like a mother figure to me. During a trip to a national dance competition, she drove to Virginia Beach with three friends to see me perform. My mother not able to go and not able to stomach the 10 hour drive, I had to ride with my dance teacher, her husband and a long caravan of dance students and parents that trailed behind. My sister came out a day or two later. I remember being up on that makeshift dance floor that had been laid in a ballroom of the hotel for the week of competition. During a quiet moment in the song I could hear my
sister yell my name. I would have been embarrassed but I was irritated by the whole experience with having to be trapped with my dance teacher who regularly performed with her students. I remember that there were workshops that I ditched to go hang out with my sister and her friends on the beach. I wore my glasses in the water and was swept away by a current, my face dragged along the bottom of the sandy ocean. I came up and they were gone. Swallowed by the sea. And so I decidedly rode back to Ohio with my sister, blind as a bat with the horn of the car stuck into position half way there and the heat blasting so the car didn't sputter to a halt. But it didn't matter.

*********************************

We had been through a lot together, my siblings and I. So, during the summer of 2009 when I was given the opportunity to work in a vacant space downtown, I decided to utilize the images of small girls in dresses that I had used so many times before. Sometime during my two year wandering between my undergraduate and graduate studies I found that box of old letters and cards from my father. I hadn't seen them in years and thumbed through them slowly. I hadn't been making much art because I was working two jobs to save up for my next move, not yet knowing that I would be accepted into graduate school. I felt like I was just drifting, not knowing what to do. But I took one look at the illustrations on those cards and it struck something in me to start making work again. The look of these images reminded me of illustrations from children's books, not present day but some other era. So I began to search. I began to collect as I normally would when I get fixated on some new material to work with. I would frequent the three
thrift stores in Lancaster and I would gather piles of ten cent kids books that were worn and musty, typically the books that no one else wanted. I came across a book titled, *What Mary Jo Wanted*, which would become the focus of an entire body of work.

Enamored with the line work of the artist, much like my father's cards, I was interested in the images of young girls in dresses, folded over socks and Mary Janes. To me these represented a past, maybe a past that I had once known being dressed up for Sunday school attending a Nazarene congregation that I am sure now my extended family disapproved of because they are Catholic.

Illustration 8. Intestinal Fortitude. Photo by Sara Kathleen Berens.

When I started the work, *Intestinal Fortitude*, I had no plans in mind, just the images of those girls, an overhead projector and craft paint. Once the figures had all been
applied on the interior of the glass, I began the language of the ribbon. It was the first
time I would use this language and it would carry throughout the rest of my graduate
work. I found a power to it. This red ribbon was at once able to lead the viewer’s eye
throughout the work while creating a visual clue to connection and bond between the
figures. The hands of the two girls were bound to each other by this ribbon. The color red
alluded to innocence, sexuality, violence, and blood. In a way I saw these girls acting as a
representation of my sister and myself, bound by the fact of being siblings but also by the
violent past that we both shared and endured, having been witness to episodes and
explosions that have shaped who we are.
During this time I was also starting to utilize medical illustration in combination with the illustrations of these young girls. For some reason, I was drawn to an image of the intestinal track. Maybe it was the form of the organ that I liked or maybe it was the idea of the intestines that struck me. I had been looking at a series of medical magazines titled “Clinical Symposia” and came across an image of a middle aged woman. In the fashion of medical illustration her organs were drawn with her, showing the viewer where
they would reside within the body. Being interested in the idea of the interior, I saw the organs as existing as another sign and signifier for these inside spaces, the intestinal track being a part of the digestive system, which acts an idea for consumption and expulsion. Other areas within the work that align with medical texts are revealed arm and leg bones. These moments allude to the idea of exposure as well as a sense of growing old but harboring “ghosts” from the past.
Chapter 8: Cycle

Everyone has a childhood memory that is so vivid that they can recall the way the air smelled or the look on someone's face. In elementary and secondary school I always had those friends that liked to recall their early childhoods. They liked to hear about their coming into the world or how they bathed with their best friend when they were 3 or their favorite anything. I never added to those conversations. I was the one who always pretended like I didn't remember anything and since friends were rarely allowed to stay the night I didn't have to fear them asking my mother about my past.

This day was one when you feel electricity in the air and you know at any moment the sky could open up. When the air is warm but there are sudden breezes that grace your skin and you can smell the pollen on the wind. The sky casts a strange hue of yellow then blue, yellow then blue. He came like hellfire or at least that's how I remember it, in an old pick up truck. He had been following us all day trying not to be seen as my mother took my sister and me to have our hair cut. Waiting until the moment when we reached our cramped apartment at the edge of town he quickly moved towards the door in an old trench coat that had been in a bag of hand me downs. There was a bitter odor on his breath. A smell that I wouldn't recognize until I was much older. He swaggered and swayed. Not really out of character for him. He told my sister and me to
stay outside as he pushed my mother past the door. She took me away as she always did to shelter me from the storm.

I know there was yelling and pleading. Thumps and screams. It was always like this when he came home with his breath smelling like the devil. But this time, it had gotten so bad that my brother, only a teenager at the time, tried to defend her and told us to run. So we did. We ran from our tiny apartment into the stares of the neighbors trying to peep out of their windows and those who blatantly stood on their porches and did nothing. My sister and I ran with our tiny fists clenched so as soon as we reach the neighbor's house we were sure to be heard pounding down the door. As we pleaded with them to call the police their refusal forced us to continue on to the next door.

When they came, she was barricaded in there with him. The door locked. The curtains slightly drawn. The blue and red lights reflecting off of the windows. Urgency in the air. He refused to let her go, one arm wrapped around her neck and the other wrapped around a shot gun. I had no idea where it came from. A strong voice came over the intercom of the cruiser, “come on out, we won't shoot”. This bargaining went on for what seemed to be hours and finally when nothing else was working the neighbor's cordless phone was placed into the palm of my hand. The weight of it heavy in my grasp. The number to the apartment was dialed and I could see him pick up the phone. I remember his face, trembling and scared, angry and crying. In a voice no louder than a whisper I begged my own father to let my mother go. The next thing I remember was my mother sitting in the backseat of the cruiser. Her face was expressionless. Drained of all color,
void of all emotion. I tried to embrace her and feel her warmth but she didn't move, in shock from what had unfolded that night. Years later I would find out that my paternal grandfather had killed his wife. I suppose that some people are destined to try and repeat history. To cycle.

There are moments in your life that are permanently seared into your memory, the residue unable and unwilling to wash off. That night is one of mine and although I never directly reference the repeated motions and images that I remember into my work, it seeps in. I never consciously intended for my thesis work to exist as it did. It was an intense and often times painful process. I received multiple bruises from installing the work and my eyes welled up when I scraped the paint off the glass knowing that it would only ever exist again in photographs, in memory. My partner, Ian, wanted to do that task as he helped me to erase away the lines of my work, but I wouldn't let him. I didn't understand why until I could feel the razor blade slide down the glass and hit the edge of the acrylic paint as it removed the faces of the figures that had taken hours of work. Hoping no one was watching I placed my palm up to the hand of the figure I was erasing away. An action that I had seen spectators do on the other side of the glass as I was installing the work. I realized in that moment that this entire process was acting as a point of healing and that's what it did. Something jarred loose from my remembering that needed to be let go.

In the weeks leading up to the removal of b(a/o)ndage, I had begun writing this thesis. It had started as a bland analytical recreation of what I thought everyone else saw in my work. Quietly I knew what my work was about. I had thought about it many times
before as I hung my drawings on my studio wall. But I was unwilling and unable to talk about their true meaning. For me art exists as an intuitive process, a response, an action, a reaction. The images that I am drawn to hold their power because of the experiences that I have had. How can people ever truly separate themselves and their life from their work?

Illustration 13. B(a/o)ndage. Photo by Sara Kathleen Berens.
As I called my mother to tell her the nature of this writing, I was driving on a week day during heavy lunch time traffic. I had no idea where I was going but kept driving, scolding myself for not being more on top of things. It was one of those moments when my subconscious was driving the car and I was paying more attention to the conversation. I had heard that once, about driving in the car, that sometimes your subconscious takes over without you realizing and suddenly you are at your destination, arrived without the slightest idea of how you got there. The road was hazy through the wetness that had formed on the surface of my eyes. I decided to pull over. In all of those years, she had wondered when it would be, when this conversation would arise. I shielded my face from the cars pulling into the parking lot and from the glare of the bright green field that lay out before my car, an industrial lawn mower loudly shearing the grass as it glided to the left of me. No one can ever truly understand the weight of that conversation. Or the weight that it lifted.
Illustration 14. B(a/o)ndage. Photo by Sara Kathleen Berens.
Illustration 15. Detail: B(a/o)ndage. Photo by Sara Kathleen Berens.
This work no longer exists and I am o.k. with that fact. It served its purpose and now can only be remembered through photographs and memories of the spectators and daily passersby who were confronted with this image cobbled together from my hand. Even if they made the conscious choice to ignore the work on their daily commute, their peripheries would have thought otherwise. They became a part of the work more than they can ever imagine, briskly shuffling on the sidewalk past the work to their destinations, the viewer from the interior of the gallery comparing the size and shape of the pedestrians on the sidewalk to the figures painted on the glass. They were waiting for something to happen and for those passersby to interact with the work, to have some recognition or acknowledgement of those hooded women—or at least I was. As I recall now, they were more comfortable with the work when they could see me working on it—a plain clothed mid-western girl pushing paint around on glass. Maybe the fascination came from being able to see the person behind the smoke and mirrors and to be able to observe voyeuristically without consequence. Maybe their discomfort was intact once I was gone because they wondered what in the hell I was thinking. I find myself wondering the same thing.

The subconscious is a tricky thing. It spills forth without warning and without forgiveness. That is how this work exists for me, as a representation of my subconscious. Although there were formal conscious elements at play such as color and composition, I
see it existing as most of my work does, as an intuitive representation. The intuitive exists from the marks and residues that are left on our subconscious mind and memory from the past whether that be images, sounds, emotions or smells. Ghosts. Once the appropriated image was chosen for this work, I let the intuitive decide what would happen from there. The initial image was chosen for its contradictory nature much like how my remembering of the stories told interact with the remembering of other family members.

I remember flipping through an American Red Cross CPR workbook. She was kneeling beside a man lying face down on the floor. Her hand raised in the air as if she were waving to someone in the distance. The man was clearly passed out and giving no response. There was something amiss about this image that made me wonder what was actually happening in the illustration, the subsequent text reading, “Check for Unresponsiveness” and “Shout for Help”. There was calmness to her face that made her seem un-concerned. I had seen it many times before in the illustrations and texts that I scoured for source material; contradiction and strangeness. Maybe it is from my perspective or maybe it actually exists but you can see it everywhere: in airplane manuals conveniently placed in the backs of seats or in directions for the new bookcase you just bought.

Instructional illustration or the manual have been around for centuries, depicting in images what text is trying to express. Through the exposure of these images we have become visual readers. We search for clues in the image and body language and gestures
become the new alphabet, exposing true feelings. In his book published in 1644, *Chirologia: or the natural language of the hand*, John Bulwer states:

“In all the declarative conceits of gesture whereby the body, instructed in nature, can emphatically vent and communicate a thought, and in the propriety of its utterance express the silent agitations of the mind, the hand, that busy instrument, is most talkative, whose language is as easily perceived and understood as if man had another mouth or fountain of discourse in his hand.” (5)

Looking at my current body of work including *b(a/o)ndage*, the language of the hand and body has been a significant source of inspiration. As Bulwer sees the hand uttering the agitations of the mind, I see the hand and body acting in the same manner, expressively exposing the subconscious nature of the work. I allow for the image of hands and figures to replace verbal communication. Bulwer would also write *Chironomia: Or, The Art of Manuall Rhetorique*. Here he included charts of drawn hands with their subsequent meanings. Bulwer was being hailed as the founding father of British Sign Language and he was among the first to publish a depictive manual. Fourteen years later Jan Amos Comenius would publish *Orbis Pictus*, a type of children’s encyclopedia that is considered to be the first picture book for children. (6). Growing up I always looked at the pictures of a book first, starting from the back and working my way to the front. I still have the habit and sometimes am only interested in the pictures.

Sitting in front of the television on Saturday mornings with my pajamas on, hair tangled in a birds nest, I would watch cartoons with a heaping bowl of cereal poured into
some recycled container. I never really remember having a bedtime but I made sure to wake up for those cartoons. When I got to be a teenager I wouldn’t go to bed until the middle of the night. On occasion I would slip out of the house after midnight and take walks around town. I wouldn’t do anything mischievous. I would just walk, on nights when I was restless and it was too hot to sleep. I only got caught for curfew once, right outside of my house. I had turned down the ringer on the phone before I left so my mom didn’t answer. They eventually just let me walk the 100 ft. to my front door. When I got inside I erased the message from the police. I would also walk out onto our roof. There was a door leading from the upstairs bathroom onto a flat surface, and I would climb the rest of the way to the apex and I would sit staring at the lights of the glass factory that is our neighbor. One night over the loud speaker I could hear them singing happy birthday at one o’ clock in the morning.

I was an escapist then. I am an escapist now, utilizing the form of illustration to create and dive into my own story. Like the dolls of Hans Bellmer, I arrange and re-arrange parts of a whole until they make sense, or at least to me. I am interested in their ability to have costume changes or symbolic changes through the use of composition or clothing. For the installation, *b(a/o)ndage*, I was most interested in the use of the hood and mask, symbolic gestures of hidden and multiple identity which carry connotations of violence and sexualization. Scouring the internet for images I became interested in aspects of various masks, eventually marrying three together to make the final image. These three are an S&M mask, a pillow case mask and a full facial mask that is utilized in cold weather. Thinking back to my childhood I see these three as relating to a specific
memory or figure, but once they are posed to the public their social associations such as crime, terrorism and deviance, become a part of the work. But what I find to be most interesting is that viewers will perceive the work to be a play of shock art, something to stir the pot, but it was normal to me because I have lived it. And maybe that is how the personal becomes political.

Illustration 16. Detail: B(a/o)ndage. Photo by Sara Kathleen Berens.
Illustration 17. Detail: B(a/o)ndage. Photo by Sara Kathleen Berens.
Chapter 11:

I could feel the razor blade slide down the glass and hit the edge of the acrylic paint as it removed the faces of the figures that had taken hours of work. The paint curled down away from the surface and hung there making a heap of acrylic layered over top of one another. In that moment it was the most interesting part of the piece and I was cursing the fact that all of the spectators were gone. There would be no recollection or documentation of this moment, only a residue wiped clean. But I realized that there is always another possibility.
Endnotes


2. Linda Nochlin, The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor for Modernity, (Thames and Hudson, 2001)


6. “Google Timeline”,
http://www.google.com/#q=the+history+of+instructional+illustration&hl=en&sa=X&tbs=tl:1,tll:1658,tlh:1658&ei=k2kVTKPLcOAIcAc65iCDQ&ved=0CCkQzQEwAA&fp=a2e1405cb6d18a78, (13 June 2010)
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