Safe Passage: A Story About Material and Labor

Thesis

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By
Allison Rose Craver, BFA
Graduate Program in Art

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Master’s Examination Committee:
Steven Thurston, Advisor
Rebecca Harvey
Carmel Buckley
Jeffrey Haase
Abstract

I am compelled by seemingly disparate images and observations: scar tissue, heavy blankets, capillary action, mending, the warmth and weight of our bodies. Through material investigations using primarily clay and fiber, my thoughts are manifested as sculpture. This labor-intensive process relies on endurance and care. In this document I contemplate my work formally and attempt to unravel the various impulses and experiences that drive me. It is about potential and the fertile ground between life and making.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my studio-mates, past and present.
Acknowledgments

I want to thank my committee: Steve Thurston, Rebecca Harvey, Carmel Buckley, and Jeff Haase. I will carry your critical, insightful, wonderful words with me always.
Vita

2006...................................................... East Aurora High School
2010...................................................... BFA Art, Alfred University
2014 to present ...................................... Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of
                                          Art, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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I brought my entire collection of afghan blankets into my living room. I spread them out, one on top of the other. I got underneath the dense pile. It was heavy. I felt safe and warm. Like a tight embrace, the blankets defined the edge of my body. It was a relief to know (to feel) that I am not endless.

Figure 1: Afghan stack
I make sculpture.

My process relies on labor, play, and intuition.

I want to understand the weight of labor and potential.

For over a decade I have contended with an afghan blanket collection that fills trunks, plastic bins and closet space in my apartment. I have moved it across the country and back again. The collection is physically heavy, representing thousands of hours of other women’s labor. Afghans are often made of brightly colored, cheap, synthetic yarn. It is not unusual for one to be made from bits and scraps that would otherwise go to waste. This results in strange color combinations and disjointed patterns. The energy that goes into making each one is an expression of generosity; Afghans are usually crocheted and given as gifts. They are gestures of patience, an accumulation of stitches that form something larger than the sum of their parts. Regardless of the time required to produce one, many are relegated to thrift stores. I empathize with the labor and care they embody. I want to rescue them. Coming to graduate school, I was determined to understand my relationship with these spirited yet overlooked objects. I held on to a simple idea: they are objects of physical and psychological weight.

I also identified the blankets as objects of utility and warmth. This led to a project that directly influenced my thesis research. I made porcelain hot water bottles. They offer the most insight into the content and motivations that formed Safe | Passage, my thesis exhibition. The forms were based on medical ceramics such as pap boats and feeding cups. I thought of them as cold surrogates for a mother’s body. An interest in empathy brought me to nursing and to institutional and domestic imagery. A related curiosity about the nature of intimacy and alienation motivated me to utilize slip casting as a way to explore distance through process: I removed the trace of my hand from something undeniably handmade. The result was a series of ambiguous
porcelain forms, which allude to domestic interiors and the folds of a body. Like the work that came after them, they exist as objects of both psychological comfort and unease.

Figure 2: Hot water bottle
2. Safe and Warm

Figure 3: 10,962
10,962 started as an attempt to make a discrete object that could demonstrate the weight of my afghan collection. I wanted to explore how the slow process of crocheting might be translated through a material I am familiar with: porcelain. I trusted that this translation would teach me something about the relationship between my commitment to blankets and ceramic processes. The piece, which sits in the center of the gallery, is comprised of thousands of porcelain thimbles. Each thimble has been tediously knotted to the next using greasy waxed thread. It is gray, giving the initial impression that it might be made of unfired clay or cement. 10,962 quickly evolved into an ongoing work central to my practice. In my thesis exhibition it is the access point against which the other works can be read.

Thimbles are small pieces of armor. They are used during careful acts of mending and creation. They prevent pain. Lined up in neat rows, the thimbles in this work form an expanse that responds to the volume (or lack thereof) beneath them. Draped over a chair, the object gives in to gravity, demonstrating its dead weight. Maybe it is a blanket, a skin, a net, or armor. Arranged in a grid, the thimbles become formidable, subverting initial allusions to women’s work, needle point, and idle time. They assert a degree of strength and order generally associated with masculinity. Because it is visually heavy, it begs viewers to contemplate what lying underneath it might feel like. Would it feel like the weight of heavy winter blankets? Or another person’s body? Would they feel protected? Contained? Maybe it would feel like a straightjacket, a lead blanket, a burden. The fact that viewers can mentally project themselves under the “blanket”, but cannot actually experience its weight offers space for conjecture and narrative. Having been denied a complete somatic experience of the work, viewers can negotiate the space between observation and experience.

10,962 also offers the opportunity for viewers to cast themselves into the role of maker by imagining the time and diligence required to produce it. Labor is usually considered a corporeally strenuous activity, and studio work is no different. However, I am increasingly driven
by the idea of *emotional* labor, as well, labor that will leave one just as exhausted at the end of the day without leaving a physical mark on the world. Instead, it is the work of planning, worrying, foreseeing, pretending, and consoling. Can my studio practice give physicality to this type of work? Where do physical and emotional labor overlap?

![Figure 4: 10,962 detail](image-url)
3. Bodies and Burdens

Thimbles are usually single objects. With endurance and blistered fingers I have made thousands to be ordered and attached. I learned about endurance from my mother. When I was a child she was in constant physical pain. The source of her pain is an autoimmune disease, a perverse condition that causes her body to attack its own tissue. The powerful system designed to protect her has defected. Her body does not recognize itself. My father was a fireman and alternated between working days and nights. On the nights he worked I took care of my mom. From my bed I listened. Was she comfortable? Did she need something? Caring for her, I tried to understand where she ended and I began. As an adult, I struggle to articulate the space between self and other. So I think about skin, umbilical cords, pathogens, and the careful latex touch of a nurse. These thoughts express themselves in my work through specific imagery, material choice and a preoccupation with tenderness.

Endurance is not a choice for anyone experiencing pain. Sustained from one moment to the next over weeks, years, and decades, pain is suffocating. I am fascinated by a slow accumulation of units (seconds, days, stitches, thimbles, aches and pains) that creates something of consequence. I examine this idea, find magnitude, and test my own stamina by making with multiples. Through monotonous work, I attempt to comprehend and visualize the tiny parts that amount to a lifetime, whether it is one of pain or comfort. I am simultaneously exploring my own place as a tiny part in a greater whole. My body is one of billions.

Maintaining our bodies requires persistence: eating, sleeping, excreting, washing, brushing, shaving, trimming. The never-ending list of chores my body generates informs my
work. I am my own patient, tending to the needs of an unwieldy body. It is “the other.” My studio practice stalks me with equal insistence, always slightly out of my control. In this way I empathize with the nurse. There are parallels between caring for bodies and the physical will required to produce something in the studio. Material and bodies must be lifted, sheets must be changed, kilns must be loaded. I worked in a daycare for several years and will never lift a bag of ceramic material without thinking about the awkward weight of a toddler.

Witnessing my mother’s unique experience in her body shaped my understanding of boundaries, maintenance and endurance. It influences my own physical experience, and informs how I approach material and process in my studio. There is a connection between the way I approach my body and my studio practice. I have never understood making as a choice. Like my body, it is a both a gift and an obligation. The maintenance they require is grounding. I struggle to negotiate an impulse to free myself from their demands with a sincere desire to serve them. The resulting dance is generative and my own.
4. One by One

Figure 5: Sur/rendered

Making with multiples allows me to build scale while recognizing my body’s limitations. I can do it by myself. I am autonomous. I can make hundreds or thousands of units that take up space and assert a physical presence despite being easily maneuvered and within my control. This lends the work a sense of potential. Like a nomadic dwelling, it can efficiently be taken apart and moved to a new space. Each multiple becomes raw material that can be restructured as my understanding of a particular piece’s role in my practice develops.
My piece titled Sur/rendered makes obvious use of the multiple. The work consists of hundreds of bricks made from unfired porcelain, pulverized afghan blankets and wallpaper paste. As I compulsively made each brick, I thought about bodies and burdens. Like the thimbles in 10,962, the bricks are an exploration of weight and a manifestation of emotional labor. The accumulation is heavy and must be contended with. The bricks form a curved wall that begins on the floor and sprawls across an army bed that is painted white. Clean cotton muslin sags under the bricks’ mass. There is tension between the architectural structure of a wall and the sinking cot that bears its weight. It is unclear if it is offering support or being oppressed. The military cot is an object that alludes to the strength of a soldier and the vulnerability of the wounded. Its utility is one of comfort and support.

To create Sur/rendered I spent many hours deconstructing my afghan blanket collection. Using the blankets as raw material came after two years of constantly thinking about them. I used a rotary knife to methodically shred each one. Turning them into pulp was cathartic — a relief, a reassessment. It was also consumption and digestion. I was finding productivity and potential in destruction, like masticated food providing energy or rotting vegetation fertilizing the soil. As I worked on the project, I questioned the ramifications of my process. What does it mean to consume someone else’s labor? How am I connected to the women who made the blankets that I am destroying? What is destruction?

I mixed the shredded blankets with porcelain and pressed them into bricks: building blocks. In this way, I reinterpreted the protective role of the blanket, which usually occupies interior, private space as something architectural and public. Viewed from a distance the piece is various shades of white, reflecting the exhibition’s muted color palette. Upon closer inspection, however, the brightly colored bits of yarn become visible. Each one is multicolored, an endless amalgamation of colors: neon pink, ultramarine, acidic yellow, avocado, mauve. The largest obstacle that I faced using afghan blankets was resolving their garish color and cheap material
quality. I found it distracting. In combination with porcelain, however, the color is mitigated and I can use the blankets without denying their color, which is an important aspect of their identities.
I have learned that, in addition to offering scale and flexibility, the multiple is also a compositional strategy. Pieces find form and content through an accumulation that takes on a life of its own. This allows me to work without having to make decisions each step of the way. How a piece will ultimately exist in the world reveals itself through time, accretion and play. However, this strategy can make it difficult to determine when a piece is finished. This creates an atmosphere of interruption and continuation. Viewers might feel that they are witnessing something in progress that has been isolated. I could move the work back into my studio and pick up where I left off. Exhibiting a particular piece does not mean it is done. It may never be done. It could easily be undone. Everything is potential.

The time-consuming nature of the multiple reminds me of analogies that compare the work of mothers (caretakers) to that of spiders\(^1\). Many cultures around the world use the spider as a symbol of productivity and stubborn pursuit. I have always been intrigued by this and personify the spider as an artist endlessly trying to construct her own world. I am she. My web could easily be swept away. I would start again, finding comfort in productivity. I question the value of work that has no end, but am unable to redirect my impulses to make, count, organize, repeat.

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5. Material Needs

I use many materials in my studio. Clay and fiber, however, are the cornerstones of my practice. I am drawn to their gendered histories and relation to craft practices. Working through these materials, I struggle to articulate how craftsmanship has the emotive potential to elicit tenderness. Ceramic and fiber are ordinary and tactile. Both are common in domestic life, comprising the furniture we rest on, the dishes we eat off of, and the curtains we draw closed at night. They provide a sense of intimacy that can be embraced and/or subverted. The specific material properties of clay and fiber also excite me. Both respond directly to the pull of gravity – they are able to bulge, swell or sag like flesh. They may be quite strong or very fragile, impervious or porous.

Having been trained in ceramics, I am aware of the conventions and technical limitations it demands. Fiber comes to me with less baggage. It is forgiving and allows me to move through ideas quickly. It is familiar and gives the work softness. I am intrigued by the relationship between hard and soft specifically in relation to ceramic materials: Clay is soft, but through chemical transformation becomes ceramic and hard. This gives it the potential to record moments. I often think about it in terms of fossilization — a compression of geologic time.

*On the mend* utilizes clay and fiber to explore growth, care, and intimacy. Like a human body, the piece is bilaterally symmetrical and vertical. Its form alludes to the trunks of two bodies, legs, lungs, or chimneys. Two terra cotta tubes roughly four feet tall are tightly bound together with thread, string, synthetic hair, and borax crystals. Cotton batting cushions the ceramic tubes from the direct pressure of the binding. Cotton is used to dress wounds, referencing
cleanliness and routine. It is also used on the interior of quilts and furniture to create form and cushioning, only visible when a seat has ruptured or a quilt has torn. It is domestic guts. As threads are repeatedly pulled and wrapped across raw cotton fiber, it pinches and puckers like skin pushing through bandages.

Figure 7: On the mend
6. Contain Yourself

Figure 8: *On the mend* detail
The layer of borax crystals that encrusts the bottom third of *On the mend* alludes to geology and accretion. Each crystal is a unit. They are multiples, but unlike those present in *10,962* or *Sur/renders* they are not the result of endurance. Instead, they embody the messy, honest activity of life: A situation is set up and allowed to unfold. The process does not rely on my hand, but rather the slow accumulation of crystals. Its proliferation is more organic and out of my immediate control. Using soluble materials and allowing them to act according to their own properties without my interference came after a long investigation into restraint and its role in my practice. Restraint requires confidence, forcing me to be decisive. It means letting things be, and fighting my impulse to tightly plan each piece. I am choosing materials and processes because of their utility, and conceptual and emotive properties rather than formal ones.

My inquiry into non-compositional strategies and restraint is evident in the work *Skin & stones*, which considers the material properties of terra cotta and salt in combination. The piece is the scale of a bathroom trashcan. It is a light pink terra cotta vessel resting on a stack of afghan blanket squares that have been dipped in ultracal². Terra cotta is immediate and durable, referencing utility and stasis. It is also porous. Salt has many connotations, conjuring images of oceans, tears, and preservation. *Skin & stones* exploits these properties and associations to consider the limits of containment, skin, and boundaries. I filled the piece with ocean water, and with time it permeated the vessel. Its evaporation leaves a white residue on the exterior of the container. It sweats. The water changes the surface of the piece as a layer of flaky white salt is deposited. It looks pale and scabbed. Filling the form with water brought it to life. When the water is no longer present it appears dead, preserved or mummified.

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² Ultracal is a very dense, gypsum-based material similar to plaster.
Formally, *Skin & stones* appears to be a self-contained, discrete object. Closer inspection, however, reveals that it is a permeable container. It is difficult to definitively distinguish inside from outside. This compels me: where do things (people, bodies) begin and end? In *The Faraway Nearby*, Rebecca Solnit suggests that the only real boundary separating individuals is pain, and attempts to understand it are exercises in empathy. She writes, “Physical pain is often lonely, felt only by the person who must trust that others will believe and empathize… ‘I feel for you’ people say. If pain defines the boundaries of the body, you participate in a social body with those you
empathize with, whose pain pains you.”³ Despite our best intentions, we will never bridge that gap. There is a skin between us. Though the skin may leak, weep, and bruise, it will heal and scar, reinforcing our separateness.

The piece Basin also investigates the relationship between interior and exterior. The work is roughly the size and shape of a washbasin or ottoman, and rests on five casters that imply utility and movement. It is made out of braided synthetic hair, ultracal, cotton batting and thread. Like the other works in the exhibition, Basin is the result of a process-driven investigation of the multiple and time. Each strand of hair is a unit, relying on the next to find form and scale. I braided hundreds of feet of hair, creating one massive braid. I used the braid in combination with ultracal to coil build, relying on my background in traditional ceramic techniques to guide me. Once I had created a vessel, I was inspired to fill it. I filled it with cotton batting, stitches, and labor. Unlike its unruly, caked exterior, the interior is clean, white, and careful.

The use of hair in Basin is a direct, bodily material choice. While hair is a corporeal reference, there is also a relationship between braiding, sewing, and utility. Women braid their hair to get it out of the way. In the fairytale Rapunzel, the princess uses her hair as a rope. I am attracted to hair as something that we take ownership of, and acknowledge as a part of ourselves despite the fact that it is dead. Sometimes it is beautiful and sought after, other times it is repulsive. It occupies a curious place between familiarity and oddity, like the mole under my nose, or the odd shape of my pinky toe.

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Figure 10: Basin
7. Scaffolding

Arranged in the gallery, all of the pieces in the exhibition become strange domestic props waiting to be utilized. The scene is both comforting and alienating, like a bleak hospital room or camp. While the cot in *Sur/rendered* and the chair in *10,962* are obvious access points, the other pieces also contribute to the narrative. *Skin & stones* refers to a trashcan and *Basin* might be a wash bin or ottoman. *On the mend* is a point of contemplation, a fireplace or chimney. Attempts to define the works in relation to each other demand negotiation between estrangement and connection.
This line of inquiry, that seeks to define familiar/strange, self/other, is likely a response to my mother's experience with autoimmune disease. She also endured a double hip replacement during my first semester of graduate school. In two separate surgeries the top of her femurs were sawed off and replaced with metal balls. Her hips sockets were ground down and resurfaced. X-rays reveal a bizarre juxtaposition of bone and surgical steel. The ten-inch scars that run down her sides, marking where she was sliced open, are clean and tight. When I see my mom I think about the pieces of metal that mediate her movements. Despite being a profound intervention, they are hers.

In reference to her own work, the artist Jessica Stockholder wondered if “Perhaps our first experience of landscape is the big bodies holding us.” This question, which articulates a relationship between landscape and the body, caused me to reconsider how scale operates physically and metaphorically in my work. If a body can be landscape, then so can sculpture. I saw my work from a new perspective; Personal experiences have political reverberations.

Articulating my work in relation to geography, borders and migration has felt increasingly necessary. It is just as much about my body as a collective body — bodies moving across borders, assimilation, diffusion. This is a direct response to the 2016 presidential election, and the real pain being wrought on bodies through policies that deny healthcare, refuge, autonomy. It determined the title of my exhibition, Safe | Passage. I have a new sense of urgency, and am reminded of the privilege and responsibility that comes with being an artist.

Learning to see my work from a distance expands its potential and gives me greater insight into my practice. I have realized that through my practice I am building scaffolding, trying

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5 Comparing the (female) body to landscape is potentially problematic. I do not mean to imply it is unruly, or fertile but without agency (in contrast to the civilized male body). Stockholder’s observation is an attempt to understand the infant’s experience. It should not be misconstrued to imply something else.
to get a better view of the interconnected experiences, observations and realities that inform me. These experiences might be deeply personal, or sweeping and political. Sometimes, they are both. I digest them through material, relying on both play and labor. It is unclear if my material or conceptual curiosity came first because they operate in tandem. When material confounds me, I can turn to conceptual curiosity to keep me going. When the opposite is true, I yield to material investigation and process. I am grounded by the routines and demands of my studio, and my own capable body. I am my own foundation.

The afghan blanket collection that occupied me for the last several years is gone, consumed. I now face the task of discovering another point of reference to expand my understanding of labor, weight and potential. Like exploratory surgery, it will be messy and exhausting. The pursuit will manifest as sculptural objects, each work asking a question that the next one will try to answer. I can rely on this.
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