

HYPERFLORA

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by
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INTRODUCTION

Suffering is a universal experience which exists in varying degrees. An injured soul seeks protection from what has harmed it, and can seek safety in withdrawal, isolation, depression or mania. My thesis work is a vessel for coping and healing, and the thinking that lies behind it. I use biomorphic forms that cluster, cover and consume the wearer as the physical manifestation of emotional shelter. These adornments, referencing magic, tarot, and fantasy, are imbued with a protective and healing aura. This sense of protection, in whatever form it takes, acts as armor fortifying the wearer and allowing them to confront their trauma.

In my own experience, I have known suffering which has manifested from the loss of my Father in 2005. I was very young at the time and did not know how to cope and build a positive foundation for healing. This suffering was perpetuated with a lack of support from family, who refused to acknowledge the benefits of therapy and counselling. The result was a prolonged manic-depressive state in which I existed for more than ten years. I became isolated within my sorrow, desperately searching for comfort, healing, and protection. I found comfort in art and the fantasy realms of video games. Seeking guidance through tarot and a spiritual practice in Witchcraft allowed me to build a foundation to heal from the suffering of my loss. As a result, I have learned to armor myself with these coping mechanisms to better reconcile with future hardships, and to rebuild my identity and personality. This is what has informed my artistic practice in Adornment. This body of work is personal to my own process of healing; however, the act of adornment and the experience of suffering is universal, and it is in this way I connect

with the viewer and wearer. The absence of an explicit narrative invites the wearer to impart their own experiences to create an interpretation they resonate with.

HYPERFLORA

Hyperflora is a word to describe the conjunction of identity and nature. *Hyper-* appears in loanwords from Greek, where it meant “over,” usually implying excess or exaggeration.¹ I use *Hyper-* to describe facets of identity willingly expressed or sheltered. In tarot and astrology, these can be equated to the Sun, Moon and Rising sign. Each describe a person’s overall personality traits, shadow or intuitive aspect, and the rising “face” you present to the world, respectively. *Hyper-* refers to the aspect of personality expressed by the wearer from the piece and presented to the viewer, embodying combinations of Sun/ Moon/ Rising. Jewelry, and the larger category of Adornment has a social role as an outward identifier of personality, but also performs internally on a psychological level. I will refer to this as *aura*, as it is something that is felt within a subconscious or intuitive space.

The suffix, *-flora*, describes the natural, biomorphic, and organic elements that have influenced my work. I have always been a “nature-lover” and have yearned to make work that references the natural world around me. Especially interesting to me have been patches of moss that cling to the sides of logs or rocks. Investigating these micro-environments further leads to discoveries of bugs, twigs or fungi that exist only in that space. The finest example from my experience are the forests on Deer Isle, Maine, observed during a workshop at Haystack Mountain School of Craft. During my daily walks on the isles winding trails, I observed and

¹ “Hyper-.” *Dictionary.com*, Dictionary.com, www.dictionary.com/browse/hyper-.

recorded the patches of moss that covered the rocky foundation of the island. Each individual species of moss had its own texture, shape, and hue. The moss would be “stitched” together by the soft exposed earth in between the patches, forming a natural quilt that blankets and protects the landscape.² Also observed on the islands rocky shores were the clusters of barnacles and seaweed that appeared at low tide. The bleached-white barnacles blanket the rocks similarly to the mosses in the forest, and cluster together in patterns of rounded, oblong pyramids.³ I consider barnacles to be a part of flora in this aspect, as the calcium shell they construct around themselves are an unmoving part of the environment even though they are a marine crustacean.

Aspects of nature, both flora and fauna, feature prominently in tarot and spiritual worship of deities. For example, the card *The Empress* features imagery of pomegranates, which denote fertility, abundance and wonder that surrounds us⁴ and symbolizes the influence of Persephone. Because of my research into the symbolism in tarot, it became important to include specific forms that denoted concepts such as armoring and protection, expression, and identity. Each “suit” in tarot corresponds to the four elements, which in-turn has a metaphysical meaning with positive and negative aspects. Using my own interpretation, I have assigned each element with a biomorphic form.⁵ By combining these visual signifiers with color and material, the viewer can intuitively “read” the aura and mood expressed by the wearer as one would read a spread of cards.

The work in *Hyperflora* is intended to be an outward expression of coping and healing from trauma. Therefore, each piece is intended to adorn the body as a piece of armor. I have

² Fig 1

³ Fig 2

⁴ “Symbol Meanings of the Tarot (L - R).” Symbol Meanings of the Tarot (L - R). Accessed April 16, 2020. <http://www.tarot teachings.com/symbol-meanings-of-tarot-l-r.html>.

⁵ Fig.3

appropriated the word “armor” separate from any implied historical context, choosing to not explicitly reference any point in history or culture. This as a way to eliminate the possibility of cultural appropriation and further the movement to de-colonize art. Armor is meant to refer to protection on a psychological level, like a child’s security blanket, while also taking on the fantastical designs of armor represented by video games. Unlike armor which is mostly associated with thick plate metal, or heavy materials, I have chosen instead to use soft materials such as wool felt, textiles and various man-made materials in the construction.

My motivations for using textiles and alternative materials as adornment was both a necessity and conscious choice. After breaking my dominant arm, I was unable to work with metal and hand tools. I turned to felting and digital fabrication, finding physical therapy and a creative outlet. This necessity turned into my primary processes after my arm healed. At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the campus shut down, and my access to the studio disappeared. My practice became more textile centric, employing sewing, beading and embroidery techniques in my work. I hesitate to say that I am making with “alternative materials”, because much of the contemporary works in jewelry are made of plastics, rubber, wood, textile, et-cetera. I think at this point, I would prefer to describe my work as “material adornment”, and myself as a Materialsmith.

Each piece in this series is activated by the body both physically and metaphysically. Referencing “Body” by Damien Skinner “Body as a place for jewelry display is both “a reference point and a vehicle”.⁶ Therefore, the object of adornment contains power but can only be harnessed when worn. The context in which each piece of armor finds its use is given by the

⁶ Damien Skinner, “Body,” in *Contemporary Jewelry in Perspective*, ed. Damien Skinner. (New York: Lark, 2013), 67.

title, which plays upon the lofty, fantastical names given to items in video games. Some examples include the “Mask of Truth” from *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask*, which allows Link to see invisible objects and enemies, and “The Boots of Blinding Speed” from *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, which do exactly what they describe: make you run fast but cause the screen to go black while in use. The work is successful when the wearer simultaneously transmits the imagery as identity and seeks to be an individual that carries this aura as a part of their identity.

HYPERFLORA- INDIVIDUAL WORKS

The work titled *Mantle of the Fortified Heart*⁷ is a large piece that adorns the wearer over the head and upon the shoulders. A mantle references a garment such as a shawl that is draped across the shoulders. The verb mantle also refers to cloaking a person or object, and *to mantle* is to pass on a responsibility, role or burden. The wearer takes up this mantle as a signifier that their emotions, commonly believed to reside within the heart, have been fortified from strife. Fortification can be read from the barnacle clusters both on the capelet and the embellishments as well as the vine element that binds the piece to the wearer. From the barnacles, blooms of life emerge as colorful displays of emotion and happiness. This signifies that as a result of fortification, one can open their heart and flourish. As part of this aspect of their expressed identity, the wearer should adopt a posture signifying power and confidence.

The work titled *Sorrow Aspect Mask*⁸ relies upon the wearer to actively hold the piece up to the face with both hands. This piece is activated by the display of grief. The wearer adopts a pose that conveys inconsolable sorrow, and sobs into the piece. The barnacles, dyed in a mournful black, are clustered over the eyes, extending above the forehead, over the ears and

⁷ Fig. 4, 5

⁸ Fig. 6, 7

cascades down the face leaving the mouth exposed. Dark, iridescent glass beads emerge from the voids, the inside of the barnacles appear to be filled with tears, and clear wisps of sea grass reach out from the crevices. The beads and grass represent tears streaming down the face and evaporating. This piece is inspired by the thirteenth card in the major arcana of tarot: Death. When Death comes up in a reading, it “may be experienced as a loss of interest in life, a withdrawal and disinterestedness, and a loss of hope”.⁹ This card reversed also denotes “a resistance to transformation and change; loss; depression and despair”.¹⁰ This piece has power when the wearer is consumed with grief in an unhealthy way. While the mask is made from soft wool, providing comfort, the person wearing the mask is blinded and isolated from the outside world. Instead of providing protection and fortification, the barnacles could permanently consume the wearer in darkness. Unhealthy bereavement is “grief that does not resolve naturally and persists far into the indefinite future as a defining feature severely adversely affecting the life of the survivor. The person is incapacitated by grief, so focused on the loss that it is difficult to care about much else”.¹¹ By their own will, the wearer must remove the mask, and return to life.

*Armor of Lessening Rumination*¹² is a large cuff that is fastened to the wrist tightly, yet comfortably. The organic forms of barnacles and kelp circle the wrist and protect the wearer from ruminations of self-harm, instead inviting exploration and comfort. The wearer interacts with the piece by investigating the barnacles through touch. Sterling silver encrusts some of the forms denoting preciousness and growth. Comfort is provided through the material quality of felt and pressure therapy.

⁹ Gwain, Rose. 1994. *Discovering Your Self through the Tarot: a Jungian Guide to Archetypes & Personality*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Frances, Allen. 2012. “When Good Grief Goes Bad.” HuffPost. HuffPost. October 31, 2012. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/grief-depression_b_1301050.

¹² Fig.8

*Let Me Wander/ Keeping Still*¹³ consists of 3 functional objects: a small pillow, a soft mat, and an adornment for the neck. These objects together are intended to facilitate the practice of meditation. Many think that meditation is easy; sit down, close your eyes, and don't think about anything. This couldn't be further from the truth. The Buddha coined the term *Kapicitta* or "monkey-mind" to describe the pattern of restless thoughts that dominate the mind. Bhante Dhammika, a contemporary Buddhist Monk, transcribes this teaching which said;

"Just as a monkey swinging through the trees grabs one branch and lets it go only to seize another, so too, that which is called thought, mind or consciousness arises and disappears continually both day and night".¹⁴

The intention for this set of objects is to calm the mind through ritual interaction. First, removing the chain of flowers from around the pillows edge and placing it around the neck, setting the intention. Second, finding a comfortable seat upon the pillow and becoming aware of the surrounding mat. Once seated, beginning to explore the surface environment. Allowing yourself to feel the textures, peek into every crevice, under every leaf and finding yourself within a micro-environment; all at once existing so large upon the fabricated landscape but at the same time so small in presence to the outside world. This is what I strive to achieve by practicing meditation; connection to the world in breath and energy yet disappearing completely from the ego.

As one of the primary materials, I have repurposed a tattered blanket that was my Fathers. At first, I was hesitant to cut up something that was so sentimental to me. The thought of potentially destroying one of my "links" to him was something I didn't want to risk. I then recalled my conversation with Renée Zettle-Sterling, who was a visiting artist in February of

¹³ Fig.9, 10, 11, 12

¹⁴ Dhammika, Bhante. n.d. "MONKEY MIND, THE." Guide To Buddhism A To Z. Accessed April 17, 2020. <https://www.buddhisma2z.com/content.php?id=274>.

2020.¹⁵ We both share the loss of a family member; her brother was tragically killed in a hunting accident. In her mourning adornments, she utilized her brothers clothing to manifest her “Objects of Mourning” series inspired by Victorian mourning practices. She described the physicality of grief, which she describes as a state of concussion and feeling of heaviness. During our private critique, we spoke at length about sentimentality and the weight that objects carry. To her, the process of cutting and altering her brothers clothing was cathartic. Once she was able to resolve herself of the fear and guilt, she found that utilizing these materials gave them new life and her brothers aura was able to endure in the pieces she created.¹⁶ After our conversation, I found it easier to let go of the attachment I had to the blanket itself. I found it cathartic in my own way, transforming a tattered blanket into a garden that was thriving.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting upon this work and my experiences has allowed myself to be more at peace with my present condition. I have come to realize that this work is more closely related to my previous body of work than I thought. *Atlas Memoria* was small, personal and intimate. It was meant only for my specific experience of loss. *Hyperflora* opens the process of healing and fortification to a wider audience, which is what I struggled with in *Memoria*. However, both are built on the foundation of emotions, and experiencing them. This quote by Israeli experimental artist Yaccov Agam sums up this resolution:

¹⁵ “Artist Talk - Renée Zettle-Sterling.” *Kent State University*, 7 Feb. 2020, www.kent.edu/art/event/artist-talk-ren%C3%A9e-zettle-sterling-0.

¹⁶ Zettle-Sterling, Renée. ”Personal Critique.” Critique by Renée Zettle-Sterling, February 7, 2020.

“There are two distinct languages. There is the verbal, which separates people... and there is the visual that is understood by everybody.”¹⁷

When I can find the point where an object is imbued with aura, without the need to explain the entire history of who, when and for what reason it exists, I feel the most successful.

¹⁷ Yaacov Agam, "10 Quotes from Famous Artists to Remind Us Why Art Matters". Park West Gallery. 2016-10-03. Retrieved 2018-07-03.



Figure 1. Moss/ Environment Observations



Figure 2. Barnacle Observations

Element	Symbolism	Denotation
Water	Barnacles, Ocean Flora,	Emotions, Intuition
Earth	Flowers, Moss, Grasses	Prosperity, Money, Tangible Objects
Fire	Vines	Fire of Inspiration
Air	Pollen	Intellect, Speech, Communication

Figure 3. Element Associations



Figure 4. *Mantle of the Fortified Heart*



Figure 5. *Mantle of the Fortified Heart* (Detail)



Figure 6. *Sorrow Aspect Mask*



Figure 7. *Sorrow Aspect Mask* (Detail)



Figure 8. *Armor of Lessening Rumination*



Figure 9. *Let Me Wander/ Keeping Still*



Figure 10. *Let Me Wander/ Keeping Still* (Detail)

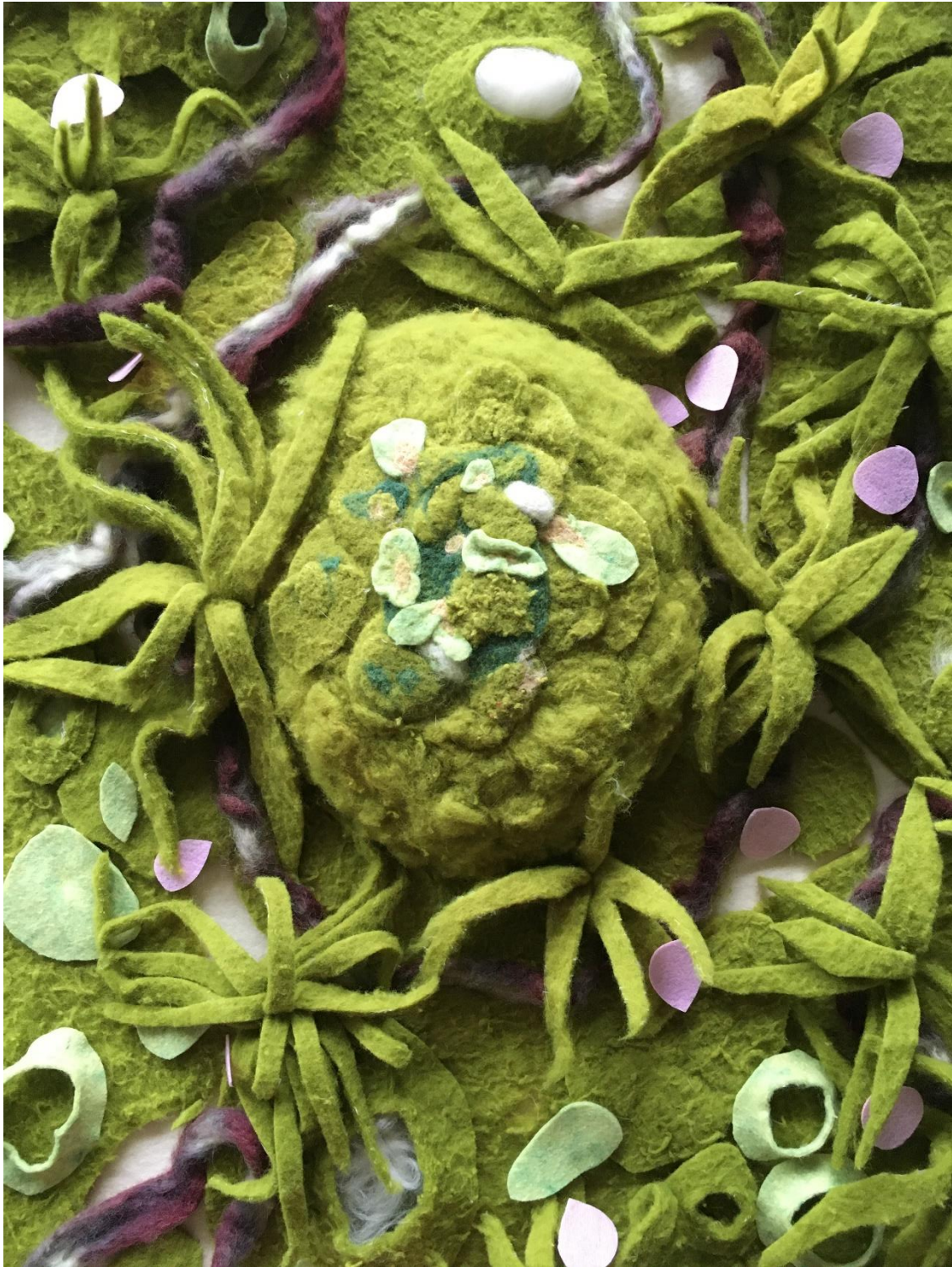


Figure 11. *Let Me Wander/ Keeping Still* (Detail 2)



Figure 12. *Let Me Wander/ Keeping Still* (Necklace)

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