

THESIS

RESONANCE: MEMORY AND EMOTION

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### RESONANCE: MEMORY AND EMOTION

Through an investigation into the trauma responses of my body, from dissociation to panic attacks, I have built a body of work that relies on the associations and interactions of material and process. I have developed a sensitivity to material and processes guided by the desire to communicate feelings and emotions that are difficult to put into words. These materials vary based on clinical properties, historical contexts, or personal memory. While working, I am concerned about what materials may communicate beyond their intended purpose, pushing the material to broaden my conceptual ideas.

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## RESONANCE: MEMORY AND EMOTION

I focus my emotions into visual language to connect with others on an experiential level within my work. I am interested in the trauma responses of my body, from dissociation to panic attacks, that have consumed my idle moments. My choices in material and processes respond to communicating feelings and emotions that are difficult to put into words. My work utilizes material to convey the deeper meaning of objects that I create. While making my objects, I am concerned about what a material may say beyond my purpose of using the material. My work is a visual documentation pre-and post-diagnosis of bipolar type II and how this diagnosis created a shift within my work. Thus, my work has created the opportunity to process the world around me and how my body interacts.

Every day we encounter numerous materials, and subconsciously or consciously, we develop associations with those materials. In my practice, material plays a crucial role in my work due to my associations and memory. Lead, sterling silver, plaster, copper, hair, lace, rock, and even dirt all contains importance within my work. My approach in using these materials varies based on clinical uses, historical context, and personal memory. For example, sterling silver's anti-microbial protective traits in comparison to leads toxicity and contaminating properties are based on these materials' clinical properties.<sup>1</sup> Hair was used to commemorate loved ones through mourning jewelry during the Victorian era.<sup>2</sup> An example of mourning

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<sup>1</sup> Sim Wilson, et al, "ANTIMICROBIAL SILVER IN MEDICINAL AND CONSUMER APPLICATIONS: A PATENT REVIEW OF THE PAST DECADE (2007-2017)," in *Antibiotics (Basel, Switzerland)* (MDPI, October 26, 2018), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6315945/>.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Campbell Warner, "MOURNING AND MEMORIAL JEWELRY OF THE VICTORIAN AGE," in *Dress* 12, no. 1 (1986): 55-60.

jewelry is Queen Victoria's Locket (Fig. 1) containing a photo and lock of hair from Prince Albert.

The role material takes in my work concerning memory is through general associations, tactile qualities, and the energy and resonance material carries. My work contains memories of materials such as lace, sterling silver, hair, and rock. These materials tie to a specific memory of anxiety and persona. The lace related to my youth when I developed an understanding of who I am as a person. Sterling silver (my grandmothers' spoon collection) represents a moment of anxiety; at that moment, I was confronted with fears of a new world during the pandemic. Hair, my hair, a sense of identity, and a source of anxiety that documents my most vulnerable moments. And rock, a memory of pure panic and the physical reactions within my body.

My earlier work focused on coming to terms with my past medical misdiagnosis and self-actualization. *Residual* (Fig. 2) is a necklace made from cast bronze and copper chains; the bronze objects are threaded through like a pearl necklace. In this piece, I wanted to visibly create a heavy object that weighs on the wearer's shoulders, representing the weight that a person may carry when infected with HPV. This piece successfully showed the weight, but it felt demeaning and disconnected from the original intention of empowerment and recognition.

*Enoument* (Fig. 3) is a mounted trophy to a younger self. This piece recognizes my younger self for her resilience as a young woman venturing out into the adult world for the first time on her own. This was a significant time of growth for me experiencing new things and my first opportunity for sexual experimentation. This piece was emotional for me because it references several memories of the time, from being slut shamed to contracting an STD that went undiagnosed for a period. This piece utilizes lace as a visual timeline of my childhood into early adulthood. The bronze blossom posts that hold the lace represent my femininity and growth. At

the same time, the walnut plaque hides the backside where I have marked my triumphs in understanding my sexuality and resilience. I chose to mark my triumphs on the backside because I decided that my opinion and self-worth were determined by myself and not by others; this was a pivotal moment in understanding myself within the world and my place in society.

*A Whistle in the Dark* (Fig. 4) was created based on my anxiety surrounding my teeth; I was born with a genetic deformity in my molars that created many problems for me. This deformity increases the possibility of cavities and chipping, leading to infections if untreated, and I had many uncertainties surrounding this deformity. These teeth are susceptible to heat, cold, and dense foods. After cracking one of my molars, I became hyper-aware of its existence, becoming more cautious when eating. In response, I created a pair of sterling silver retainers that protected my molars from my other teeth, providing an anti-microbial barrier between my regular teeth and my abnormal molars. In this piece, sterling silver was important due to its natural anti-microbial traits and the similarity to the practice of silver capping within the dental field. *A Whistle in the Dark* also pays homage to my time spent as a dental technician. During this time, I learned processes used in fabricating dental appliances. These skills have crossed over into processes that I utilize in my practice today.

A piece I created alongside *A Whisper in the Dark* was *Monomania* (Fig. 5), a single lead cap; this cap highlights a single molar that had cracked and was a constant reminder of the deformity. Lead is highly toxic when ingested and is also a contaminate to sterling silver. In this piece, I use lead as a primary material to enhance the toxicity of a single tooth. The crack in the tooth caused severe pain and created moments of thought and concern that often spiraled into an unhealthy obsession. I frequently found myself racing to the internet to search related symptoms,

often finding the worst-case scenarios, leaving me with restless nights and obsessive thoughts. This piece was my first exploration of anxiety as content; it became a source for further research.

In the summer of 2021, I was diagnosed with bipolar II; this was a significant shift in how I understood my emotions. Bipolar II is categorized as episodes of major depression followed by hypomania, with a repeated cycle lasting around a week but never reaching a full manic episode.<sup>3</sup> After arriving at this diagnosis, I became aware of my emotions; they cycled through my body unexpectedly. When I started a mood stabilizer to manage my symptoms, I noticed a difference. I no longer felt the extremes of the cycle, but anxiety crept into the forefront. My symptoms regulated made me painfully aware of my anxiety, and I had several severe panic attacks that increased with each episode. Anxiety became a core emotional state that began to drive my work; I focused on my body's physical responses during my panic attacks and began translating them into objects.

In my most recent work, post-diagnosis, I create objects that speak to their audience—forming connections by utilizing a visual language that can communicate the feelings that many are experiencing for the first time. In my piece *Asphyxiation* (Fig. 6), I used river rocks alongside plaster. I create a representational contrast between the natural rock and the mimicking plaster. The river rock represents my real problems during panic attacks, such as hyperventilating, increased heart rate, and dizziness. The cast plaster stones represent my spiraling thoughts that only increase my anxiety during a panic attack, such as "people are staring... I am having a heart attack... and I am going to pass out."

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<sup>3</sup> Joel Paris, and Adam Bayes, "DIFFERENTIATING BIPOLAR II DISORDER FROM PERSONALITY-BASED DYSREGULATION DISORDERS," in *Bipolar II Disorder: Modelling, Measuring and Managing*, edited by Gordon Parker, 3rd ed., 77–90, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, doi:10.1017/9781108333252.009.

*Detach* (Fig. 7) is the first in a tryptic series based on a cyclical emotion and feeling that I frequently encounter. I created this piece based on the experience of dissociation; this is a mental reaction of withdrawing from stressors. The bubbling of the surface is a reference to the visual snow I experience at the end of a dissociating episode, and as I "come to" the uncomfortable tingling of numbness. When asked to explain my dissociation feelings, this piece was started based on a phrase; I stated, "it is like staring at a black mirror." The black mirror is a reference technology and its relationship with humans.<sup>4</sup> My dissociation of choice is obsessively scrolling through social media until I no longer feel real. However, instead, I think of myself as a thought not genuinely existing, the world becomes too big, and I suddenly become small. Copper, for me, represents the body, able to withstand heat and pressure, soft and hard at the same time. I use raw copper in my work as an association to high energy compared to a darker patina of blackened copper. The darkened copper tiles reference the depressive state that often accompanies my dissociations. The tiles repeat themselves, each similar but never completely the same, like the days that pass by. I choose to use patination also to create meaning; the dark liver of sulfur softens the energy of the metal.

The second piece in the series is *Titter* (Fig. 8); I started this one based on the opposite emotion and feelings compared to *Detach*. This piece is the counterpart of *Detach*; it represents the high energy and anxiety of an emotional cycle. Whether it comes before or after a depressive episode, there is always a manic period of high energy and anxiety. In making *Titter*, I used raw copper tiles that had been brass brushed and sent through a tumbler to create a surface that visually overwhelmed me. I chose to fold the metal in this piece to create linear patterns to create

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<sup>4</sup> Terence McSweeney, and Stuart Joy, "INTRODUCTION: READ THAT BACK TO YOURSELF AND ASK IF YOU LIVE IN A SANE SOCIETY," in *Through the Black Mirror: Deconstructing the Side Effects of the Digital Age*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2019), 2.

a rippling action throughout. For me, my anxiety and hypomanic episode come in like waves with high lows, like floating in the ocean on a boat, constantly rocking. I used repetition and scale similar to *Detach* to pair the two portraits in making this piece. The underlying structure has lines cut into the surface, bisecting the lines of the upper tiles creating a point of tension and the want to see more of the cut lines that hide behind.

The third piece in the series *Phases* (Fig. 9) ties *Detach* and *Titter* together into a single piece. There are also monotonous days in the cycle that all seem to run together, with a few days mixed in of high anxiety or days of solitude and depression. The panel is cut and gilded with copper leaf, representing a feeling of mimicking what "normal" is, how I should behave, and what is expected. The wood itself is not metal but a replacement for more valuable and durable material. The series was a beginning step when diving deeper into these emotions and feelings initially hard to describe. The longer I sat with myself, the more emotions came flooding in. I had to translate them into objects that connected with the body.

In the neckpiece *Encroaching*, I chose to engage the body as a vehicle for a bodily reaction to anxiety itself, more so a visceral reaction the body endures during moments of anxiety. This neckpiece is made from my felted and embroidered hair, which symbolizes the suffocating feeling of my anxiety when I feel trapped by my hair. As my anxiety increased, I noticed the aversions I was developing with my hair; it had to be tied away from my face as quickly as possible. Soon this was not enough. My hair then began to be tied up every day; this caused my hair to endure stress-causing large amounts to fall out. I started using my collected hair to spin a thread to embroider with; as the amount of hair increased, I began felting it into dreaded ropes. This process provides a moment of relaxation, watching the fibers become something new. The process of spinning and felting reduced the anxiety I had been feeling.

During this process, I decided to harvest my hair because I needed more—taking my midback length hair down to a short, cropped hairstyle. I was now freed from the suffocating weight of my hair. *Encroaching* became a memorial piece to an era in which I fought my anxiety.

In the Victorian era, hair was used in memento mori to commemorate and preserve a deceased loved one. The hair was used as decoration or woven into intricate chains allowing the hair to be worn by an individual.<sup>5</sup> The use of hair in my work stems from a compulsory tick when I am anxious; I need to pull out my hair, eyelashes, and eyebrows. Hair presents itself as moments of stress, panic, and an overwhelming sensation. For me, hair creates a sensory overload during times of stress; this sensation often sends me into a panic attack. Even though I am not dead, during these moments of panic, I believe and process through feelings and thoughts that suggest the possibility of death. Hair is one of the few cellular structures that primarily carry mitochondrial DNA, the lineage of female ancestry.<sup>6</sup> After my bipolar type II diagnosis in 2021, I began talking to my family, and I started to learn more about my family's history of bipolar that was never talked about. Several of the women on my mother's side had been diagnosed with a form of bipolar. Hair in my work also symbolizes my family and the ties that bind us. My family can be overwhelming and stressful, but there is a connection that can never be broken within the women of my family.

In my final piece, I return to my time with my grandmother during the initial lockdown of 2020. In the piece *Rumination* (Fig. 11), sterling silver spoons incorporate ideas of memory, happiness that is fading, and the preciousness of an object. In my work, sterling silver represents

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<sup>5</sup> Patricia Campbell Warner, "MOURNING AND MEMORIAL JEWELRY OF THE VICTORIAN AGE," in *Dress* 12, no. 1 (1986): 55-60.

<sup>6</sup> J. William O. Ballard, and David M Rand, "THE POPULATION BIOLOGY OF MITOCHONDRIAL DNA AND ITS PHYLOGENETIC IMPLICATIONS," in *Annual review of ecology, evolution, and systematics* 36, no. 1 (2005): 624–627.

a "silver lining," either figurative or literal. During my time with my grandmother, she told me many stories about her travels in Europe and her happy memories attached to each of the spoons. I spent months staring at the spoons and even took time to polish the tarnished surfaces. I was left to sort through my thoughts while polishing these spoons; I had thoughts spiraling in my head. Will the world return to normal? What was it like to live and travel carefree? Will I have my collection of trinkets to tell my grandchildren? In making this piece, I toiled with these similar thoughts but now must grapple with impending wars along with the pandemic. How do you describe nostalgia for something that has not happened? I created a necklace that encompasses the neckline separating the head from the chest; this references my conflicting thoughts and my heart. While my thoughts remain rational, my heart yearns for possibilities that seem out of reach. I chose to make this a neckpiece because I feel a tightness in my throat when I think about this time. Is it from a need to cry or the nostalgic longing? The spoons reference my grandmother's collection, but their emblems remain empty to a location.

The pandemic has been a pivotal moment for so many, but for me, it has been an awakening to emotions that I had previously kept locked away. This body of work has created opportunities for others to connect with myself and others in a universal experience. Through the development in material language and translating emotions and memory into physical objects, I created the opportunity to express to others the struggle of anxiety and depression in hopes that they, too, can find solace in their struggles.



Fig. 1  
Camille Silvy (1834-1910)  
*Queen Victoria's Locket* c. 1861  
Gold locket with onyx, diamond and enamel design, with hair and photograph contained  
inside, 3.7 x 2.4 x 0.6 cm (whole object)  
Buckingham Palace, London, UK. | RCIN 65301  
<https://www.rct.uk/collection/65301/queen-victorias-locket>



Fig. 2  
Mariah Shelby  
Residual  
Copper, Bronze, Liver of Sulfur  
2020



Fig. 3  
Mariah Shelby  
Enoument  
Bronze, Lace, Walnut, Dirt, Brass  
2021



Fig. 4  
Mariah Shelby  
A Whistle in the Dark  
Sterling Silver  
2021



Fig. 5  
Mariah Shelby  
Monomania  
Lead  
2021



Fig. 6  
Mariah Shelby  
Asphyxiation  
River Rock, Plaster, Copper  
2022



Fig. 7  
Mariah Shelby  
Detach  
Copper on Wood Panel  
2021



Fig. 8  
Mariah Shelby  
Titter  
Copper on Wood Panel  
2022



Fig. 9  
Mariah Shelby  
Phases  
Copper on Wood Panel, Liver of sulfur  
2022



Fig. 10  
Mariah Shelby  
Rumination  
Sterling Silver, Liver of sulfur  
2022

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