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Port to World

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020

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Virginia Commonwealth University
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To Mom, Paul, Christine, Jaydan, and most certainly Maggie. Thank you.

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Abstract

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By Samuel Monroe Brown, MFA

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020.
Major Director: A. Blair Clemo, Assistant Professor,
Department of Craft and Material Studies

Among those that are ill for long periods, there is often a mistrust created not only in one's own body but in the institution that promises a cure to the malady. Often this stems naturally from the dogma of the institution paired with one's desire for wellness, for the institution's goals are many besides the overall health of the patient. Even when a patient is cured of an ailment, this is often just the first step in the actual healing process. The body can quickly change, and the mind takes time to catch up with the body's condition. My work examines ways in which patients find cures for themselves between the physiological and psychological, alternative ways of thinking that allow people to cope and potentially subvert the rigid ideal of what is considered healthy in the western medical institution. Using clay as a medium to describe the human body, I analyze personal and shared histories surrounding illness with research focusing on virtual connection and coping mechanisms. This culminated research will result in an installation titled, *Port to World*, which explores ideas of personal healing, magical thinking, and the need for an unsterile space.

Introduction

Themes in my work all originate from my experience with cancer at the age of 19. My work investigates my continued struggle with this disease as well as how it affects my family and how it continues to affect me. After being deemed in remission at the age of 21, many aspects of my health and life became uncertain. Chemotherapy and radiation had changed my body and mind drastically, and I feel like many parts of the illness have not left me even though physically it has. I realized that psychological relief from the looming idea of death often came through coping methods that I compulsively created separate from the medical institution and therapy in the traditional sense. These methods led me to a line of inquiry questioning what is required to heal from the effects of physical trauma psychologically. My work investigates how to alleviate the anxiety of illness and the cultural constraints surrounding it. Whether I am deriving information from family trauma or seeking ways to escape mentally, each work is an experiment in giving agency back to those that have experienced illness.

Other Worlds and the Virtual

In the time between my remission and the time I was diagnosed with cancer, I spent considerable time in an apartment by myself while I awaited chemotherapy sessions every two weeks. As I recovered from my sessions, I would try to occupy my time by reading books and talking to friends or family. Soon enough, the anxiety of the next treatment would make me feel sick with dread, for often chemotherapy patients develop a physical repulsion days before having to go into the hospital again. The remedy to curb these feelings was something that was not expected, but to my gladness distracted me aplenty - video games. I discovered that if I could live in another reality with other tasks and be visually occupied by landscapes that were not actual, but virtual, then I could feel like I was a part of a world and avoid thinking about my current situation. By playing titles such as *The Legend of Zelda* series or *The Sims*, I found a form of escapism that allowed me to have an able body, albeit virtual.

For my purposes, I will be using the definition of the virtual primarily as it relates to technology in Merriam-Webster: being on or simulated on a computer network. I do align myself with Deleuze's concept of virtuality as it relates to the actual philosophically, for I believe it can distinguish the computer-virtual as it relates to our virtual memory. Deleuze states that the virtual as relating to memory is "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract".¹ Peter Gaffney describes Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the virtual and actual in their book *What is Philosophy* as rather than two separate terms that oppose each other, they are an

¹ Pearson, Keith Ansell. "The Reality of the Virtual: Bergson and Deleuze." *MLN* 120, no. 5 (2005): 1112-127. Accessed May 15, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/3840700, 1123.

² Gaffney, Peter. *Force of the Virtual: Deleuze, Science, and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, 1.

actual-virtual system that are in productive tension producing thought. The actual is not what we are but, rather, what we become, what we are in the process of becoming². These definitions

helped me understand that what I see on the screen is real in that a window can be interacted with, but in actuality, it is nowhere. Deleuze also insists on the generative nature of the virtual and its potential to be fulfilled in the actual. While images can be seen in the virtual, it does not make them material (actual), although the image itself may be formed by pixels and energy (real). Deleuze's conditions are vital justifications to understand as I discuss building memories that are from virtual computer realities.

After remission, I realized that this time spent in the virtual game was a pleasant distraction in such a painful time, but it was also my reality. It may not have been actual, but for a year, I existed in these spaces, and my dreams started to include the physical world and the video games I played. While I knew that the virtual platforms I experienced did not contain physical objects, I began to imagine how my living room or kitchen would look if stylized in the format of my favorite multiplayer game. A few years later, when I looked at a mountain with cows roaming the countryside, the scene reminded me of where I grew up, but it also reminded me of my character traversing Termina field in the Zelda franchise. A certain nostalgia for these other worlds was becoming a part of my day to day experience, and further, I realized that I had shared nostalgia and shared memories with other people because of these video games. These virtual worlds that contained visual and auditory memories could alter how I experienced the physical world and interacted with like-minded individuals. Further, these virtual memories that I recollected had the potential to be therapeutic due to the many hours of logged gameplay. I questioned if objects could contain game design patterning to bring about the same nostalgia for the viewer.



Figure One: *Autofill Objects*, 2018

In my piece, *Autofill Objects*, ceramic parts were made with the same color scheme of arcade games like *Galaxia* or *Tron* from the '80s, where color schemes were limited because of the available screen colors at the time. A strong example of this was the widespread and still prevalent red versus blue player occurrence in multiplayer games. The airbrushed effect of the surface also is reminiscent of shaded relief maps or bathymetric maps made using DEM (Digital Elevation Models) where computers would shade elevation simulating where the sun would be projecting. While I manually applied color to create a shadow on the terrain of the clay texture, a similar visual effect occurs and places the work in a particular era. Each piece hung on the wall was fashioned similar to household objects or shapes in video game worlds. I chose to use the forms of household objects loosely because domestic items are easily recognizable. The result was an abstraction of different forms, and the intent was to allow for the varying works to either be categorized into the actual world or virtual world based upon memory. Additionally, because

this work was on the wall and placed in a gallery, it was similar to 3-d images on a screen that one cannot touch yet understands visually. This work is what led to an examination of visual aesthetics and the potential to pull an audience out of this world via imagination and projection.



Figure Two: *Autofill Objects* (Detail), 2018

It should be noted that while this work uses color and computer-generated shading aesthetics from the 1980s, a more contemporary portrayal of current video game images or aesthetics would be more similar to actual life (higher definition), a more realistic simulation. This has led me to question how much detail or data is required to make an object or space appear actual versus virtual. If one aligns themselves with the quickly growing Dataism philosophy, one might find that there is less of a difference between what is data and what is material. In *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, the author Yuval Noah Harari states: “Science is converging on an all-encompassing dogma, which says that organisms are

algorithms and life is data processing”.³ It should be noted for my work that this is an example of how the separation between what is data and what is actual is becoming quite thin as time progresses. This line between the simulated and the actual has become increasingly imperative to my research; for this demarcation that exists between worlds, I can relate to my own experience with chemotherapy. Cancer patients live by jumping between several divisions of thought, and my curiosity is how healing can also work in this manner. My mind spent time in video game spaces and the actual extent of my home; my body was affected by food grown from the world and the synthetic drugs used in my treatment. By creating a bridge between both realities, forms of healthy escapism can be provided, especially for bodies that are not able to be fully active in an actual world.

Health, Wellness, Mindfulness

In 2010, when I began to have health complications, it was noticeable that the concept of wellness and mindfulness became popular in tabloids and digital forms of media. The self-care approach to health also became a marketing strategy to sell consumer goods. Bodies that advertised these goods reflected youth and avoided the abject. Mindfulness had become a catch-all, pseudo-spirituality, and from my standpoint, I felt added pressure to obtain the idealized healthy human advertised in health promotions on Facebook or Instagram. Ronald Purser in his book *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* argues that in “individualizing our responsibility for our own spiritual well-being, our capitalist system, which produces so many of our psychological problems, is let off the hook”.⁴ As

³ Harari, Yuval Noah. *Homo Deus: a Brief History of Tomorrow*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2018, 203.

⁴ Company, David. “Looking for Transcendence: Can Photography Represent the Ineffable?”, April 13, 2020. <https://davidcompany.com/looking-transcendence-can-photography-represent-ineffable/>.

someone who was directly dealing with the abject effects of chemotherapy, I examined what the hard sought image of someone with a mindful, healthy lifestyle might entail realistically. My body was losing hair and rapidly multiplying cells quickly, and I questioned how to categorize my state of being in the media. Wellness had become crucial for my immunocompromised body, but also for people in other age ranges existing on a variety of medications and treatments. The innermost principles of wellness and mindfulness are not at fault, but the capitalization of those efforts has created an idealized image that many cannot achieve.



Figure Three: *Fruit Cycle*, 2018



Figure Four: *Fruit Cycle* (Detail), 2018

In my work titled, *Fruit Cycle*, I created three closed ceramic forms that had flora like appendages and represented plant bodies. Each design was spaced out and placed on a mound of sand. Spread out in a circle on the floor, each ceramic piece displayed a similar yellow-pollen color on the exterior, and each successive form was larger than the last with anthropomorphized appendages that became longer and stretched out like flat fingers. In between the plant-like bodies were mounds of sand that had nothing on them and were visual points of absence along the cycle. My intention was for the forms to be viewed as an organism growing along a lifecycle, and the exact progression's ending to be open for viewer interpretation. Considering the youthful, able-bodied, and highly stylized bodies that are portrayed in the media, I aimed to have the viewer recognize what stage along the cycle contained a potential for bloom or perhaps death. The absence of potential sculptures on the empty mounds allowed for other steps to be reconsidered as it relates to stages of human life. While this idea did aim to shed light on problems within institutions with wellness agendas, it did

not address issues that are in closest proximity to patients struggling with an illness, which is that of the medical field.

Besides the illness itself, medicine can cost the most harm to patients. Susan Sontag discusses that the relationship between hospital and patient is similar to a military contract, for the language surrounding cancer and its treatment is that of warfare. Sontag states in *Illness as a Metaphor* that:

“The understanding of cancer supports quite different, avowedly brutal notions of treatment. (A common cancer hospital witticism, heard as often from doctors as from patients: “The treatment is worse than the disease.”) There can be no question of pampering the patient. With the patient’s body considered to be under attack (“invasion”), the only treatment is counterattack. The controlling metaphors in descriptions of cancer are, in fact, drawn not from economics but from the language of warfare: every physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology. Thus, cancer cells do not simply multiply; they are “invasive.” (“Malignant tumors invade even when they grow very slowly,” as one textbook puts it.) Cancer cells “colonize” from the original tumor to far sites in the body, first setting up tiny outposts.”⁵

Amongst the many terms such as “warrior” and “survivor” that persist within medical vernacular, this combative lifestyle is one that is not separate from its inner casualties. Any type of warfare usually has flaws within its system and risks a lot to gain a win. Unfortunately, the battleground is the body that contains cancer. I am hesitant to use this language, but it is necessary to understand this analogy because it explains how cancer is not the only offender to the body in treatment.

⁵ Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. London: Penguin Books, 2002, 54.

The Right Medicine

The western medical institution has the end goal of solving a patient's health problems, but the solutions proposed do not always promote the overall health of the individual. There are many things to consider like adverse side effects from drugs, malpractice, and trauma from treatment. Carolyn Lazard in her essay *The World is Unknown* writes:

“Biomedicine is a clinical science that endeavors to regulate the body using biochemical and physiological principles. Biomedicine’s history is relatively short: the epistemological framework comes from the Enlightenment and the practice comes from the development of germ theory in the late nineteenth century. Biomedicine treats “health” as a kind of balanced stasis, which is the desired state of being. Anything that deviates from this is bad, pathological. The rhetoric of biomedicine can be especially damaging: there is a cure, and in the absence of a cure there is death and management. There is nothing else.”⁶

As another potential for healing Lazard discusses alternative medicine and the term holistic medicine saying:

“While the core of biomedicine is positivism, the core of alternative medicine is holism. It’s a system of knowledge acquisition based on feeling instead of testing. A process of re-enchantment with the body. The focus on holism allows for an expansive set of explanations for why something is happening in the body. Your underactive thyroid might be the result of bacteria in your gut, the chemical plant next door, your abusive childhood, or all three. Holism acknowledges the mysteries of the body.”⁷

In most of Biomedicine, alternative practices are seen as quackery because they are not all cure-oriented. Lazard proposes that though this may be the case, many patients realistically

⁶ Lazard, Carolyn. “The World Is Unknown by Carolyn Lazard.” Triple Canopy, April 19, 2019. <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the-world-is-unknown>, 3.

⁷ Lazard, Carolyn. “The World Is Unknown by Carolyn Lazard.” Triple Canopy, April 19, 2019. <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the-world-is-unknown>, 4.

keep one foot in the door of each of these practices. After having my stomach filled with radio-isotope contrast syrup for a PET scan, I would implement a green tea and vitamin C binge to alleviate my headaches and acid reflux. This is just one example, but the reality of this is all too real. For people to fully heal a combination of support systems are required and by discrediting one way of healing over another it puts the patient at a disadvantage. This divide that occurs in the medical world needs to be addressed because as Lazard explains, dogma is the real inhibitor of health:

“What professionals on both sides of the ideological divide refuse to understand is that most sick people—people who desire health, whatever health means—are open to anything that will work, no matter the origin. I’ve come to understand that the enemy of health is neither pharmaceuticals nor snake oil, but dogma. The body is too unwieldy to fit within any totalizing discourse.”⁸

Considering Lazard's claim, it is beneficial to think from the perspective of the patient and allow all types of healing to be examined as possible strategies. It also cannot be assumed that Biomedical practice can provide everything in a holistic sense. Trauma alone is something that can last long after treatment. As well as other medical problems paired with the psychological, this can perpetuate a cycle keeping people dependent upon the Biomedical system. This dependency can be unintentional, but capitalist virtues undoubtedly exploit this need that is created.

In Josh Kline’s installation, *Skittles*, various brands of over the counter medicine are infused and sleekly packaged in a commercial fridge. The appeal and digestible quality of this work highlights that individual wellness has been exploited. Self-medication has become necessary to rewire the body to fit the demands of labor in a capitalist system. This work allowed me to examine how intensely dependent that western society is upon cure-oriented

⁸ Lazard, Carolyn. “The World Is Unknown by Carolyn Lazard.” Triple Canopy, April 19, 2019. <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the-world-is-unknown>, 4.

medicine. When people are so reliant on a network, especially economically, it breeds compliance, and to begin addressing this, I wanted to discuss ways in which the institution fails from a personal level. Due to the many triggers within the hospital, it is important to note various ways in which agency can be given back to patients by subverting the actual language and trauma.



Figure Five: Josh Kline, *Skittles*, 2014 (detail)

Altering Medical Language/ Triggers and Trauma

One of the first difficulties that patients encounter when entering the hospital system is the ever-evolving medical terminology. Of course, patients are usually provided information about treatment and their condition, but those with a scientific background are more fluent and aware of one's prognosis. When I went through treatment, I googled my diagnoses often and only found grim outlooks on the internet. Doctors I spoke with about my possibilities always

provided me with information packets about my cancer stage type, but the scientific jargon always felt a bit unfamiliar. I had to rely on the larger system, and this is anxiety-inducing to put hope in the hands of strangers. In Carolyn Lazard's ongoing series *In Sickness and Study*, she takes these stills from Instagram as part of a project where she uses the books read to inform herself as she goes through the healing process within the hospital. To have agency over one's body within a system requires one to understand the lingo between hospital staff, anatomy of the body, and partial chemistry to feel like one has some control. In seeing these images, I felt empathy because there was an exhaustive amount of research involved within my chemotherapy and radiation regimen. This work provided a new way for me to consider my experience with Biomedicine, and I recollected struggles with language in the institution for my work.



Figure Six: Carolyn Lazard, *In Sickness and Study* (Site-specific on Instagram), 2015



Figure Seven: *The Waiting Room* (Installation View), 2019

In one component of my installation, *The Waiting Room*, I considered instructional plaques and simple directives that are present throughout high traffic hospitals and altered the imagery to reflect my desires in a traditional waiting room setting. The bold lines and simplistic caricatures of human hands are present, but the other parts of the image are ambiguous. The graphic itself is spread out over a grid of clipboards that would be traditionally hung in a triage for staff to read patient history. By customizing the directive language of the system, the absurdity of the language is exposed. The directives are either calming or confusing, depending on how the image is perceived. This ambiguous language reaffirms how hospitals often perpetuate an environment that feels unknown when patients are already in unfamiliar territory

with their bodies. Medical settings must evolve to break down the language barrier and communicate with patients in ways that make their condition and treatment transparent.

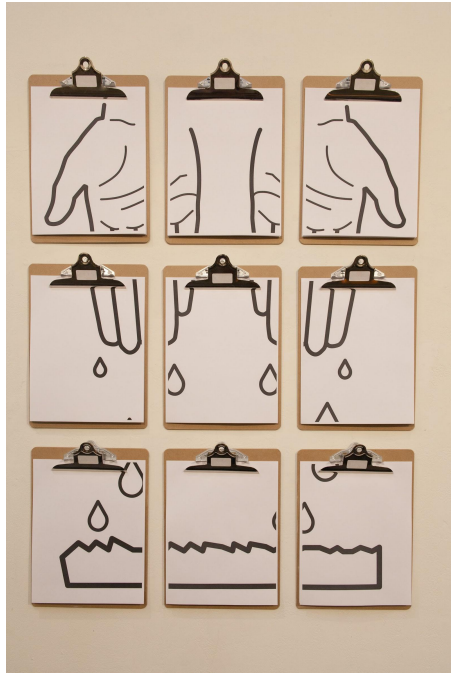


Figure Eight: *The Waiting Room* (Detail), 2019

The first time I entered the hospital as a child, I remember being struck by how bland and lifeless the rooms looked. The bright, fluorescent lights exposed every inch and one could see every part of me - I felt exposed. The white space and the lighting have the purpose of revealing potential dirt and uncleanliness, but these sterile spaces become quite damaging for those who come to them frequently. As humans, we are composed of minerals, water, and bacterial ecosystems that are always in flux. The white space that smells of green soap contains the hum of machines could not be more different from our bodies. However, the ability of these places to curve the spread of germs is necessary, and many hospitals have started working with interior designers and artists to make spaces more appealing and emulate the natural environment. In my most recent visit to my oncologist, there was a fully functioning gas fireplace, and the walls were lined with led lights that would change color as you walked by. This

mix of the natural and the futuristic is a current trend that is stepping away from the dreary, white space, yet there is still some sort of essence that spreads the same dismal feeling of a vapid hospital corridor. Industrialist design, uniformity, and synthetic fabrics are all factors that become recurring themes.

After my fourth treatment of chemotherapy, I remember I could taste a metallic, bitter flavor in the back of my jaw when I got close to my IV station. Either it was the new taste of my saliva that was part of my altered blood system from the drugs, or it was the memory of the heavy mineral solutions pumped into my bloodstream. The cords, monitors, white ace bandages, and the smell of rubbing alcohol mixed with my sense of the space - I felt like my body was rejecting this sterile reality and the cyborg-like dependency on the non-human. My ears and fingers would swell from the drugs in my body as my eyes grew heavy. In another two weeks, the same thing would happen again and the lights would seem brighter than they were before.

It is a known fact that the effects on the mind change the body. Carolyn Lazard states:

“...there is a general consensus that the mind, in fact, resides within and is a part of the body. The material and immaterial parts of a person are enmeshed. Thoughts and feelings are tied to organs and tissues. The mind’s profound influence on the body is such a universally acknowledged phenomenon that even biomedical doctrine contends with it.”⁹

⁹ Lazard, Carolyn. “The World Is Unknown by Carolyn Lazard.” Triple Canopy, April 19, 2019. <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the-world-is-unknown>, 7.



Figure Nine: Josh Kline, *Energy Drip*, 2013

In Josh Kline's piece, *Energy Drip*, there is an IV bag hanging from a gallery wall with the listed ingredients of what the bag contains. Similar to the previously discussed work *Skittles*, this work presents the commodification of medication with organic and inorganic substances that can be consumed. However, in this work the medical instrument is repurposed to consider the mass reproduction of this device and the cure the consumables offer in varying ways. This device created for biomedicine specifically struck me as unbelievably poignant being someone who had experienced chemotherapy. I began to see these clean, industrialized objects as tools that in aesthetic reflect the sterile, architectural elements of the gallery as well as the hospital. I saw this parallel as a possible way to subvert the medical institution through a similar industrial space. Further, the familiar medical devices utilized by Kline I felt could be used in the gallery to take autonomy away from the institutionalized areas associated with the pain of illness.



Figure Ten: *The Waiting Room (Detail)*, 2019

Similarly, in my installation, *The Waiting Room*, I utilized the blank, white aesthetic of medical instruments such as sanitizer dispensers to mimic sterile spaces, but I altered their initial purpose. Participants could activate the hand sanitizer dispensers, but only clean water would come out. The leftover water on their hands could then drip-dry onto a bed of grass on the base of the dispenser stand. By providing my audience with water and not a product with a specific purpose, the memories typically associated with the smell of sanitizer are kept separate. Additionally, by allowing the water to fall onto the grass, the participant becomes part of the environment and the cycle.

Another factor that occurred to me was the role of the patient in the process of healing. As biological organisms, usually when one enters an environment, there is a response to human actions and a symbiotic relationship forms. When I go to a lake, there may not be a direct way in which my body affects the lake, but there is always a chemical transference. The hair on my

head might fall off into the water and decompose, where later, the carbon that was in my hair might be absorbed by a fish's gills. Bodies are soft and form a reciprocal relationship with the environment, for what is expelled from the body goes into the world, and what one absorbs goes into the body. In my work, I see this cycle as something necessary for human comfort and I try to reinstate this cycle to erode layers of sterility. Most medical instruments or furniture maintain the function to serve the patient and to prevent cross-patient exposure. To mitigate the hospital's dependence on the sterile barrier and the triggering quality that these spaces have on those with illness, this piece functions in the gallery space to create an absurd, slightly humorous relationship.



Figure Eleven: *The Waiting Room (Detail)*, 2019

Mundane tasks are also another way which I enacted a cycle in the waiting room I created. On the wall, a plastic, white clock hung with clay and chia seed growing in the face over the usually present numbers. As time passed in the gallery, the water in the clay on the clock face watered the chia seed, and the chia grew out until the hands stood still on the clock. When the chia eventually died, the hands started to move again with time beginning again. This

work involved the organic nature of clay, which in essence is unsterile and can contain water for life. The everyday notion of watching something grow and eventually die was a metaphor for the human connection to nature and mortality. Time is a human construct, and nature is not tethered to time like we are, so this clock was a reminder to be in the present and to consider growth, progression, and decay as processes that are part of the body.



Figure Twelve: *The Waiting Room (Detail)*, 2019

Shared Weight / Overload

One part of illness that I was very unaware of until a few years after my remission was the nuanced shifts in my relationships. When I was in the midst of treatment, I was intensely in a haze of trying to stay positive and trying to find the support that I needed from my family and friends. I did not consider who was staying at a distance from me because the ones who were close were all that mattered. Due to the still stigmatized view of cancer, many cultural customs form that impact cancer patients directly.

Upon telling people about my diagnoses, immediately, everyone reached out via phone or social media platforms - community support through solidarity. This support felt fantastic, and it bolstered all the fear and anxious feelings that lingered as I prepared for treatment. People that I had not spoken to in years stated they still cared for me and hoped for the best. As a few weeks went by, I began to have visitors and friends call me once a week to make sure I was well. A few friends would even stay for weekends with me to distract me amidst what I was going through. Later on, after a year of treatment, I started to notice the people that messaged me in the beginning, would often stop asking how I was doing or when I reached out would not respond to my messages. I would call inquiring about their lives, yet I would get no response. To make matters stranger when I went into remission and was feeling better again, I got plenty of flowers and congratulation cards from those same people. The presence of support was undoubtedly there on social media, but the amount of personal relationships that I formed during my time with cancer was less than before my diagnosis. Some close friends of mine did not make contact with me until I was well again. Many years after remission, when a story about my condition came up in conversation, I would acutely notice if someone changed the subject or if they wanted to know more. I began to understand that illness and discussions that are intimate or surrounding the abject are a shared form of pain. It was not that I was sharing stories that were incredibly gruesome or sickening, but just the idea of my condition would often turn people away in conversation. It would have been unfair to assume that nobody cared, so I had to glean different perspectives.

The abject parts of cancer and illness surrounding death is a story that carries a weight, and not everyone in all stages in life are ready to be a part of that experience. Disease is a reminder that we are not immortal, and that I too will eventually see the end of days. Sontag writes in her most celebrated quote, "Illness is the night side of life, a more onerous citizenship.

Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick.”¹⁰



Figure Thirteen: *The Weight Of Worry* (Video Still Image), 2020

To show how illness occurs in dialogue amongst a community, I created a piece that narrated a story about my mother as my caretaker and her unique struggles. In my piece, *The Weight of Worry*, I used a recording of my voice through a blue-tooth speaker that repeated every five minutes. The narration came from under a wooden cube that was approximately 2 x 2 x 1.5 (lwh) feet with canvas stretched on top. In the center of the cube, there was a forty-pound block of moist clay that could be removed by participants. On the floor, approximately three feet in front of the cube, there was a vinyl directive in a simple serif font that stated the phrase, “This work is interactive. Carefully lift the pile of clay and place it back in the center of the canvas.” Upon lifting the clay from the canvas, my voice could be heard clearly, but the listener had to actively hold up the weight of the clay in a hunched over position due to the height of the cube.

¹⁰ Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. London: Penguin Books, 2002, 6.

My voice became muffled and incoherent to the listener when the clay was placed back down on the canvas. By lifting the clay and straining one's muscles, the participant would become an active listener, and other participants present could also listen to my voice. Additionally, there was a bucket filled with water and a sponge to wash off and dry one's hands after the clay was touched. This process of shifting one's weight to accommodate the clay, listening carefully, and washing off the clay residue into the water became a ritual of actions similar to how stories surrounding illness are transferred and grieved.



Figure Fourteen: *The Weight Of Worry* (Video Still Image), 2020

There are still parts of this work that I do not wholly understand even though many of the decisions were consciously chosen. When the work was activated, I knew that some viewers would not participate, but I could not have planned how they would react when someone else picked up the clay. People gathered around like they were receiving something perhaps more intimate if someone else held the weight for them. Further, if a participant did not place the clay back in the center of the canvas, the voice would be heard clearly; however, because of the severity and emotion in the narration, the clay would be placed back in the center. The inherent

connection to my voice as being the artists' voice and the directive on the ground made listening and putting the clay back in the center a sign of respect or compassion. The audience could easily break the rule in the directive because it was not overly specific nor a mandate, but the tone and subject changed the perspective for how the work should be treated.

The effects of the work dramatically changed based upon how many people were present; each interaction presented a potential for listening to occur differently. If a group encountered the piece, there would usually be a passing of the clay from person to person to split the load amongst everyone to listen. Sometimes a single person might come and lift the clay for the whole five minutes, or a person might not feel inclined to lift the clay at all and would just stare at the work and listen to my muffled voice. Each iteration has opened up a new opportunity for how the work can be received and within these possibilities further metaphors for how grief is shared amongst people.



Figure Fifteen: *The Weight Of Worry* (Video Still Image), 2020

The narration itself was told from my perspective about my mother's labor resulting in forty pounds of weight that she lost from her body because of her anxiety. Only by listening to the story could the clay be seen as representing the lost weight from my mother's body.

Additionally, this reciprocal relationship highlights another part of the shared experience of

illness, for my mother as the caretaker actually lost more physically than I did from cancer. This fact reifies how emotional weight is not only transferred, but also has the potential to weigh more heavily on those associated with the ill person. If my story is fully heard to completion, the knowledge of my mother as caretaker adds another link to the chain effect of grief.

Clay was chosen as the material because it is similar to the body in its malleability and water content. Over time the clay lost water and as it dried the weight became less of a burden on participants. Additionally, as the pile was held, its shape became imprinted with fingers and the material rubbed off on the hands of those who interacted with it. The residue slaked off into the bucket of water and settled at the bottom of the bucket. While the clay represented the physical weight, it also contained a potential value of the loss, and through time and many hands the weight diminished. The water acted as a way to cleanse and renew one's self from the stain of the clay. What was left over was to be seen as silt to be recycled and part of the earth again. Clay as a material was not only a stand-in for the body, for it was also dirt and can convert and fade back into the planet just like our stories through generations. After seeing the marks left by people's hands, I realized the potential for clay to contain physicality, sweat, skin cells, pain, and memory. The material nature of clay as a mineral composite allows for it to absorb and contain the DNA of many. The infinite poetry and metaphors in this became endless for my practice.

As an artist, *The Weight of Worry* has become an emotional experiment that helps me better understand my experience with grief and the abject concerning the voices in my life. It has filled a space of uncertainty in me about people, for I do believe that people want to know my story, regardless of how depressing it might be, but every person has a unique process and timing for receiving grief. I hope that continued versions of this work can act as a performative tool for helping people understand their own stories' power and how it can be shared in their community. I genuinely believe that narratives that show our mortal fragility can make us more compassionate, open, intentional, and as a result, making us better humans.

A Basin, A Well, A Reservoir

In the time leading up to my thesis, I spent ample time in my studio experimenting with water and vessels that contain it. After seeing people wash their hands of the clay that they touched in my last piece, I could not help but see water as a material that could cleanse and also nourish. Upon filling a cup with water in my studio, I noticed the vibrations from a song I was playing through a speaker, and the visual ripples reminded me so fondly of the ocean. Water is what the human body is mostly composed of, yet most of what is still unknown lies in the ocean's watery depths. This curiosity concerning the vastness of material caused me to explore human-made containers where water flows and how the context of water is transformed as a result.

I have always been intrigued by Robert Gober's sinks that are seemingly ceramic but are remarkably made of wood, aluminum, tempera, and enamel – specifically this piece titled *Two Partially Buried Sinks*. The lack of pipework and faucets generate a dramatic appearance - like something is missing. This creation of the sinks in Gober's career is not casual: it coincides with the first years of the AIDS outbreak in the United States. The sculptures refer to the uselessness of cleaning and the connection to people suffering from that illness at the time. Often when I look at this work, I get this visceral response to cleanliness and sterile spaces that are often hopeless to those that have terminal illnesses.



Figure Sixteen: Robert Gober, *Two Partially Buried Sinks*, 1986-1987

In my situation, a sink was often where I contemplated death and what it held for me, ironic as it might be that I positioned my head over something that gave me water, life, or substance to make myself clean. This object acts as a futile device if one has ever been severely sick. These sterile basins are truly life-giving to those who are healthy but are useless and sometimes morose for those that are experiencing their body failing. All this said, his work made me recognize how a vessel can have a strong memory attached to it, and the amount of water or lack of it can generate emotion.

In my piece titled, *The View from a Doldrum*, I built a round stoneware vessel 2 feet wide and 4 feet tall, filled it with water, and played a live audio recording from a public access camera off the coast of North Carolina. The sound came from 50 miles off-shore in the Atlantic ocean through a tactile bass transducer seated under the body of water. The transducer allowed for the low-end vibrations to be seen in the water, but the amplified sound did not contain the high or mid-range tones, so noise was not noticeable until one looked over the container. In the

water, vibrations from that place were transferred via vibration, and the water's reflection mirrored the wind patterns of the ocean.



Figure Seventeen: *The View from a Doldrum* (Studio Image), 2020

From a conceptual standpoint, I was thinking about the transference of data into this surrogate container as a virtual experience. The form of the vessel I wanted to be somewhere between a well for water and a rain barrel - so one particular shape would not distract from a unique experience. The water in the container was, of course, not ocean water or even near the size of a lake or pond, but the simulation and information provided are what made one consider the ocean. The streamed data of the wind against the camera moved over the water, and the light cast into the vessel made reflections on the wall emulating the ocean tide. Similar to earlier work, this piece was a first step to considering how closely I could walk the boundary of what was actual and what was simulated. How much physically in the installation needed to be similar to the ocean? How much data from that place needed to be imported into the gallery to spark someone's imagination? The goal here I realized was for this installation to become a

unique place and also allow for my audience to project their expanse and their fantasy of the ocean.



Figure Eighteen: *Spencer Finch, 2 hours, 2 minutes, 2 seconds (Wind at Walden Pond, March 12, 2007)*

In Spencer Finch's piece titled, *2 hours, 2 minutes, 2 seconds (Wind at Walden Pond, March 12, 2007)*, forty-four oscillating fans are carefully synced to the recorded breeze at David Thoreau's Walden Pond location. Wind patterns were measured by Finch using a weathervane and an anemometer at an exact date and time. Upon approaching the arranged arc, viewers can experience the simulated breeze of the famous location. Of course, comparatively, this clinical installation is far from the sensory experience that occurred on that day. This work contains finite data that tests the boundary of where imagination can take an audience. Finch's installation gives a record that repeats on a loop within the timeframe described in the title. Even though there is only the breeze, one can think of Walden Pond - the potential smells, the moisture in the air, and perhaps the dragonflies hovering by. In relation to my work, this space reflects the idea of the virtual as it relates to memory. The description of Walden Pond from the

book and Finch's simulation is, in a way, real, but not actual. The mechanized nature of the fans perpetuate a unique, physical aesthetic and experience. Still, the knowledge of the data source allows for different sensory experiences that are applied through memory and imagination. This work highlights the fact that our present reality consists of much more than just the visual, especially in nature. What perplexed me was how dissimilar the industrial semi-circle was from the actual, physical place. Spencer Finch's work gave me insight into how very little of the visual, if any at all, was needed to transport a viewer to an intimate memory of a place. Moreover, his simulation became an example of how minimal sensory data could promote escapism and projection of thought. The evolution of my project, *The View from a Doldrum*, along with continued experiments utilizing data based on location, in a manner similar to Finch, is what ultimately led to the idea for my thesis installation.

Port to World

Where do we go when there are no particular answers? How do we assuage our grief when there is no solution? As death enters into our lives one way or another, certain spaces or states of mind become sacred even if religion or spirituality are not involved.

When I was a child, whenever someone died, my mother would put on a sleep soundtrack of rain on a tin roof or the white noise of rushing water when I slept. I remember laying down and feeling like my body was floating down a river. Similarly, when undergoing treatment, I would watch live ocean cameras of different beaches around the world, the type that surfers would watch for a big swell. The videos always had a calming presence for me and held some sort of mysterious hope - similar to looking at the stars in space. An expanse can sometimes hold nothing and everything at the same time when loose ends appear in life. When the sunset would come, I would watch the pixelated waves on my laptop shift colors, and I felt

like I got to share something special with the other viewers that evening (never more than 30 live attendees).

The reality of the ocean though, is that it also holds a tremendous amount of fear and uncertainty. The sea can grow life in many forms, but the sheer unpredictability of tides and the weather patterns can also bring death. In the voyage of Bas Jan Ader with his piece *In Search of the Miraculous*, Ader took a small sailboat out on the ocean with a camera to document his adventure across the Atlantic – a performance piece that sought out the unknown and would have a record had the artist returned from the trip. It is impossible to say whether the miracle he referred to was the idea of him surviving the journey from Cape Cod, Massachusetts to England or something miraculous that he perhaps found on his journey. Sadly, nobody will ever know because Ader did not return from his voyage with his body never being found. It was him, his actions, and his will in the face of nature that formed his work as it is now conceived. The ocean and all it contains (death and life) was the medium for Ader, and if he had returned the work would be entirely different. In Alexander Dumbadze’s book, *Death is Elsewhere*, regarding Ader’s art and life, Dumbadze describes his death by stating:

“The liminal point demarcating being and non-being is a knowledge that is singular. It is never passed on, never accrues meaning through interpretation or dissemination. In whatever happened to Ader in the waters of the North Atlantic—perhaps, as his mother envisioned, rocked gently in the waves—he discovered truth as such, and in the process also made *In Search of the Miraculous* unrepresentable.”¹¹

This search for fundamental truth Ader sought in the depths of the ocean is heartbreaking but inspiring, and contains another reason why I will choose the sea as my subject matter. The enigma surrounding the sea alone is one containing death as well as the miraculous - within this, there is a possibility for the imagination.

¹¹ Dumbadze, Alexander Blair. *Bas Jan Ader: Death Is Elsewhere*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015, 143.



Figure Nineteen: Bas Jan Ader, Photograph before *In Search of the Miraculous*, 1975

Looking back on my fascination with the ocean, I realize that my fixation during my cancer treatment bordered on magical thinking. Sound, light, and certain materials can transport us to a place that is isolated in our imagination, and I am interested in how an expanse can enhance escapism and magical thinking. In psychiatry, magical thinking refers to the idea that you can influence the outcome of specific events by doing something that has no bearing on the circumstances.¹² Similar to holding one's breath in a tunnel or not stepping on cracks, children are often known to begin fantasizing in this way when the finality of death first comes into their life, and magical thinking overarches this gap of understanding. However, I do not think that we stop this process of magical thinking in adulthood, nor am I very sure if anyone is certain of death or what it holds. While magical thinking may not be tethered to logic, I believe it can be useful for understanding one's desires and dreams. This is what I want to facilitate as part of an imaginative act to grieve and heal in my work.

¹² Raypole, Crystal. "Ta Da! Magical Thinking Explained." healthline.com, February 25, 2020. <https://www.healthline.com/health/magical-thinking>.

My thesis exhibition, *Port to World*, will be an installation that acts as a space for contemplation and escapism using a transference of multiple types of data from the ocean into the gallery space. Two oval bases that are four feet long and three feet wide will be placed in the area situated six feet from each other and positioned diagonally. Each oval structure will be two feet tall with a shallow stoneware vessel oval in that shape placed on top. One of the vessels will be a saturated dark blue, and the other will be light blue with the sides of the vessels being three inches tall. Underneath each base, there will be two tactile transducers with each connected to a different amp. Each amp will be connected to an iPhone with a live stream of sound coming from two sources of the same latitude and longitude in the ocean, but with varying depths. One camera will be above water transmitting various sounds of the wind, waves, and bird sounds, and the other will be thirty feet below with sounds of the water current and potential aquatic life. Each piece will be varying heights in response to the depths of where the sound comes from, with the live stream playing continuously in the space. Water with salt added will be filled to the edge of the shallow vessels, and the vibrational sound will move the water as the live stream data changes throughout the day. Saltwater will be used in an attempt to make the water like the ocean to enhance the simulation of the actual ocean. Additionally, six Bluetooth hue lights will be on the gallery light track, with three of each transmitting the same live-stream footage from the cameras above and below the ocean. Throughout the exhibition, the shifting lights will match the color of the ocean on the monitor of two laptops that will be hidden out of sight. This lighting effect will create a simulation of the passing of the time of day in the space. As the day comes to an end in the exhibition, the lights will become dimmer and warmer as the sun descends. At night, dull greys and deep blues will come from the simulated moonlight creating a more somber mood. In the day, one will be able to expect bright blues, yellows, and vibrant greens to impact the water as light reflects off of it. The installation will be as much about color as it is about sound, and the streaming of data will reflect the weather, wind, and cloud coverage in different ways in the space. The light cast off the water will create

reflections of the ripples on the walls creating a unique experience as both streams of data change and converge as viewers walk around. The last aspect considered will be the flooring of the space. The floor will be fully covered with rebond carpet padding to act as a sound/vibration absorber and also add a soft cushioning when viewers walk in the space. The spring in the texture of the carpet padding will prime people's tactile senses when first entering the area, and the speckled coloring of the padding will broaden the color palette in the room. Considering the texture of the ocean floor, the rebond will act as a faux ocean floor or a material that speaks of the liminal space, since usually it is not seen, and it is in between the floor and carpet in a home.

As a maker who employs craft in their practice, I will be using clay as a gesture of care offering time to the viewer. The shallow ovals that will contain water will be slab built and hand pinched. By leaving the marks of my fingertips and palms, a natural impression comparable to a dimpled pattern on the seafloor. Once the work is fired and vitrified, it will be able to hold water, but the record of my body shall remain. I intend for my viewers to know upon inspection that my memory and labor was put into these surrogate vessels that can simulate and hold an aspect of nature.

In the description of the work, I will provide the data coming from two cameras, one above and one below, that are streaming live in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The other materials in the room will be listed, but the source material for the light and sound will be the primary concern. The critical element that activates the work is that the audience will know some truth in the data, and just like all good fiction, this allows for possibilities in the mind of the viewer. If I give too much information, the place could lose its mystery, and if I give too little, it could become difficult to speculate.

Throughout the exhibition, there will be times posted once a week for sunrise and sunset showings of the work. The phases when the light will alter quickly will be the most dramatic. The changing wind should also create a variation in the vibration of the surface of the thin water

pools. I will provide coffee and allow the space to be a place for contemplation and meditation. Part of my intention behind these events will be to see how a natural, outside phenomena that is received through an indoor simulation can spawn community and conversation.

As discussed in previous work, if one considers the first flow of information to be from the primary source and the installation I create to be a simulation of that source, then the imagination becomes yet another path back to the original, or at least what it could be. This use of the imagination is a way to diverge another simulation and instill personal fiction. In Italo Calvino's book *Mr. Palomar*, the protagonist of the same name in a moment of reflection states: "The universe is the mirror in which we can contemplate only what we have learned to know in ourselves."¹³ Similarly, this work will become a mirror that will facilitate magical projections as well as introspective revelations because of the open nature of the information stream provided.

Port to World will, in various ways, possess qualities similar to the sterile nature of the hospital, but the atmosphere of the room will not read as such. The instruments and materials in the space will be mostly synthetic and entirely reliable upon the mechanisms used. The saltwater will be the only substance that one could find in nature, but in reality, it will be water that has been purified with chemical processes, and the salt will also be industrially derived. Even the stoneware used will be manufactured, and thus the materials in it mined from various companies. In essence, the processed nature of the materials and the data that provide the locomotion will create the organic movement and color within the installation. This acknowledgment of the material choices is crucial because it mimics the environment of someone who has experienced illness, but the result is far removed from the typical sterile atmosphere. Upon viewing the work, the immediate connection to the medical world may be indirect if not far removed. However, this process has resolved the personal feelings I have had about sterile devices in art because of my medical history. Since this work can transmit a natural

¹³ Calvino, Italo. *Mr. Palomar*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc./Mariner, 2016, 128.

space into an industrial or even domestic space, I hope that this project can be utilized to provide healing to people with at-risk immune systems or populations that do not have accessibility to ecosystems such as the ocean.

Conclusion

My research has brought me to a place of hope despite the many problems surrounding cultural and institutional understandings of illness. While disease may be capitalized on, or stigmatized, the human spirit can find many ways to navigate and heal even if the body fails. I have learned art has a unique set of tools that can inform and alter how a culture functions and also bring inspiration and agency back to people that have experienced trauma.

The nature of how we consume digital data is changing dramatically, and as our dependency grows, there are new pathways that can connect us and the planet. As someone who is in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has already become apparent how much technology is essential for how we communicate and is a lifeline. Gallery openings and events are being live-streamed into isolated homes to keep the world progressing. Auditory and visual data is being transferred via Instagram and TikTok for the sake of keeping people out of boredom. It is only a matter of time before the other senses are considered through online platforms; taste, touch, smell, and different combinations of these could become ways for us to stay synced up. It would be remiss for me not to consider how illness and immunity function in my work after this pandemic will forever affect how we interact physically on a global scale. The pandemic has been horrific to many and most damaging, but I do think customs surrounding the ill in isolation will change for the better. I also believe the advancement of learning and connectivity online is beneficial so long as it does not separate us from our ecosystems.

Our DNA and genetic heritage are linked to the food grown on this planet, the myriad of pollen and fungus in the air, and the animals that are a part of it. The environment is ingrained within how we process our thoughts and commune with each other as a species. If simulations and virtual data can bring us closer to the planet in any way, even in isolation, I think artists and scientists should embrace it. I have confidence that *Port to World* is just one experiment amongst many where I can reconnect people with the world and provide a way to assuage grief.

My wish for myself and my viewers is an understanding that the body takes time to heal holistically. Everyone, regardless of age or condition, is struggling with their health in some way. Western medical practice is not to be demonized or glorified, but we should be more critical of institutional goals and the trauma that it can create.

Our mortality is a lighter weight shared - even if it has to be over Zoom.

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Education

- 2020 Virginia Commonwealth University - Master of Fine Arts Candidate,
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- 2016 Appalachian State University - Bachelors of Fine Arts, Studio Ceramics, Boone NC

Exhibitions

- 2020 (Cancelled due to COVID-19) Thesis Exhibition, The Anderson, Richmond VA
Surface Memory, Page Bond Gallery, Richmond VA
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- 2019 *Because Of*, Art Space, Richmond VA
To Have, To Hold, To Contain, Hawthorne Gallery, Richmond VA
SAMPLE, The Anderson, Richmond VA
- 2018 *Young + Artful*, Visual Arts Center of Richmond, Richmond VA
10 Years of Appalachian State Ceramics, Blowing Rock Art and History Museum,
Blowing Rock NC
Time Capsule, The Clay Studio, Philadelphia PA
Small Favors, The Clay Studio, Philadelphia PA
- 2017 *Winter Winter*, Minna, *featured Artist*, Hudson NY
- 2016 *Art Expo*, The Smith Gallery, Boone NC
13, The Smith Gallery, Boone NC
- 2015 *Origins*, Blowing Rock Art and History Museum, Blowing Rock NC
Tiny House of Horrors, Nth Degree Gallery, Boone NC
Multiplicity, Nth Degree Gallery, Boone NC
- 2014 *Hands*, 3rd Place, Boone NC
6x6, Nth Degree Gallery, Boone NC

Publications and Lectures

- 2019 Artist Lecture, ICA, Richmond VA
- 2017 *HEADS Magazine*, Issue no. 5, "Cup", Boone NC
- 2016 *The Peel - Literature and Arts Review*, Spring 2016 Edition, "Sawtooth" Boone NC

Teaching Experience

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Grants and Awards

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