

Tori Taylor

## Artist Statement

I create large scale oil paintings that utilize abstraction, maximalism, and bright color pallets to explore many facets of psychology. Walking the line between abstraction and representation allows many forms to be able to exist and interact with each other. My paintings have the ability to mimic the way that mental health affects our bodies, brains, and perception. Using my research on psychology and trauma, I translate the way the brain reacts to stimuli by utilizing gesture and abstraction. My bright pallets create tension between the darker subject matter of my work, which looks at experiences of trauma.

**Everything is Overwhelming**

Tori Taylor

Pacific Northwest College of Art

Figure Drawing

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## **Introduce Project Concept**

Psychology has been a growing passion of mine, and therefore it naturally has begun to make its way into my artwork. Within psychology, the many facets of trauma have caught my eye. Our body and brain are striving to keep us, but there are fewer threats to face than when these mechanisms were put into place, and your brain doesn't consider how it affects your happiness. Instead of being prepared for a threat, we become unprepared, dysfunctional, adults.

## **Line of Inquiry**

How do those affected by trauma and not affected by trauma differ? Does our impulse to recreate our trauma come through in what imagery we are drawn to? I want to explore the feeling of trauma, the different reactions of those with and without trauma to grotesque subject matter, as well as the two ways in which the brain processes danger due to trauma.

## **Context**

When we experience trauma it affects our behavior and perception as well as the types of things we are drawn to. Often the brain becomes fixated on their distress and seems to compulsively recreate the original event or events.<sup>1</sup> When someone has experienced something like this it changes the way their brain reacts to future threats. The amygdala is one area in which we interpret a threat. It acts quickly to keep us safe, however, it often interprets danger before we consciously notice what it is interpreting.<sup>2</sup> Our frontal lobes are also responsible for perceiving a threat, they use a slower more effective process. When the frontal lobes try to decipher if we are in danger or not, it takes its time processing the possible threat and makes out what it is. This response in our brain is something that could be activated when we would look up in a dark room

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<sup>1</sup> Kolk, B. A. van der. "The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma." *The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma*, 27 Nov. 2005, <http://www.cirp.org/library/psych/vanderkolk/>.

<sup>2</sup> A., V. der K. B. (2015). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books.

and mistake a chair for a monster. Trauma complicates this process, their brain becomes more prone to process stimuli as dangerous.<sup>3</sup>

The art that I am interested in making would intersect in abstraction and installation. An artist that is influencing me is Cecily Brown. Her compositions are filled with energetic brushstrokes and walk the line between abstraction and representation. Often her work flashes back and forth between abstract gestures and representational figures. I wish to have the same effect in the work I make. Francis Bacon creates paintings that bring a feeling of unease. His work often uses distortion and minor abstraction to make bodies look unsettling. His work is something that I would like to reference in my attempt to create a sense of unease in my work. Finally the artist Rosson Crow is a painter who makes large pieces with packed compositions. She uses a pallet that is often filled with pastel pinks, blues, and greens. Both her busy composition and use of color relate to the inviting yet disturbing feelings I want to come across in my work. I'm not interested in the concepts that these artists explore, but the visual aspects of their work. I hope that bits and pieces of what makes their paintings successful will bleed into my project, and in turn, make it successful.

### **Discuss Materials Process Techniques and Project**

I plan to explore how our brain processes trauma and interprets danger through one large-scale oil painting. I would like the canvas to be around 66 by 90 inches. I believe that larger paintings can often give the viewer the feeling of being surrounded by the work, and invoke overwhelming feelings more easily. Oil paint is my medium of choice for its ability to blend and depict things like flesh with more ease, its buttery quality will be crucial. These ideas will be best depicted in one large painting rather than multiple pieces because if I were to make

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multiple works, the ideas I want to come across would become more confusing. One painting allows me to express themes of trauma more directly.

The work will have a packed composition, filled with imagery, and energy as something unfolds in every corner. I also want to fill the piece with chaotic subject matter, such as snakes, figures, organs, and skeletons. Using the line between abstraction and representation will help mirror our brain's way of interpreting danger, and new threats will appear throughout the piece. Pastel colors will create a sense of tension by contrasting the content of the work. To show the painting I plan to create a space that elevates the themes of the work. I would light only the painting so that it is clear and have the room either dark or filled with red light, and play the sound of a heartbeat over speakers. These added elements would extend the painting beyond the ends of the canvas, and set a tone immediately when the audience enters the space.

### **Summary**

I am inspired by the psychology of trauma. Does our obsession with repeating trauma determine the imagery we are drawn to? How do those with and without trauma differ? Can we find comfort in disturbing images? I will explore these questions through a large-scale painting using abstraction to mimic the function of uses to determine threat. Bright and fun pastel colors used in the work will create tension in the piece and invite the audience to dive into things that some may be repulsed by.

## Biography:

1. A., V. der K. B. (2015). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books.
2. Ebenstein, Joanna, and Will Self. *Death a Graveside Companion*. Thames and Hudson, 2017.
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6. Rippon, G. (2020). *Gender and Our Brains: How New Neuroscience Explodes the Myths of the Male and Female Minds*. Vintage Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.
7. WordPress. (2021, January 28). *A psychoanalytic exploration of the work of Louise Bourgeois: Trauma, therapy and Catharsis – Charlotte Pierrel*. Ylara Magazine. Retrieved November 22, 2021, from <https://yilaramagazine.com/2021/01/28/a-psychoanalytic-exploration-of-the-work-of-louise-bourgeois-trauma-therapy-and-catharsis-charlotte-pierrel/>.
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Hi I'm Tori, I am a painter, and the title of my thesis project is "Everything is Overwhelming". I am going to start off with a trigger warning, I will be discussing trauma throughout this speech, its symptoms, as well as some of my own experiences. If you start to feel affected, feel free to leave or take a break, I will take no offense to this. Thank-you all for coming to see what I have been working on over my last year here. I owe the completion of this project to those around me, my friends who helped me keep my sanity, my teachers that guided and encouraged me, my family, my partner Dan for keeping the house clean while I was spending late nights here, and a slight dependence on red bull to keep me working on long days. I have had a really hard time figuring out what to say about this project. It's something I care deeply about, and put all of myself into. In these past few weeks I have found myself coming to school with a sore body from spending the whole day in numerous strange positions while painting whether that be laying on the floor, or hunched over for hours. This painting received everything I had to give. I wanted what I said about it to do it justice. Discussing it like this also feels like exactly the opposite of its point. I made this piece hoping for it to act as a mirror, for viewers not to wonder what meaning I bring to it, but bring their own meaning, fill in their own life, and see themselves in it. So with that in mind I am going to try my best to talk about my side of this painting, without defining it for others.

I started PNCA strictly doing detailed and colorful portraits. I had done them so much that they felt really limiting, like that was all I could really do at the time. Sophomore year I entered my first painting class here at PNCA, and on the first day the teacher told us to leave the painter we believed we were at the door. I took those words to heart, because I knew it was something I needed. My art changed drastically in that class. With packed paintings of figures, fruits, oregons, gems, and car crashes. It was so different from what I was doing, and it made me

feel like there were an endless amount of things I could make. It was freeing. I became a completely different kind of painter. During my junior year I took another painting class while the pandemic was still raging. After getting access to studio space at school, I came in and painted some work that led me to what I am making today. I depicted unconventional women, with a layer of highlights over the top of them, distorting them. I knew it would look interesting and bring me somewhere new, but upon finishing them I was shocked by how abstract they turned out. I never thought I would make any sort of abstract work, and was fixated on packing my composition with detail and realism and it felt like there was just no room for it in my practice. Those pieces changed my brain a bit and made me see the value of abstraction. I suppose if you make art long enough, things naturally start to break apart, and I was excited to play with that more. Pure and full abstraction still felt like a reach for me, but this turned my eyes to Cecily Brown, a painter I truly admire, who walks the line between abstraction and representation. Upon first glance her compositions look like abstract expressionism, brushstrokes exploding on a canvas. but the more you look, the more the paintings reveal pieces of themselves to you, and what begins to unfold are fields and fields of beautiful and strange figures. This moved me. Cecily is quoted saying “One of the main things I would like my work to do is to reveal itself slowly and continuously and for you to never really feel like you are finished with looking at something.” I wanted this effect, but on my own terms. The painting you see before you is a perfect step into that direction for me. More towards the side of representation, but with ambiguity and detail existing and creating tension with each other. The detail gives the viewer something to make sense of in a mess of things that may not make sense.

This work was made thinking about the experiences, psychology, and neuroscience behind trauma. In the book *The Body Keeps Score*, trauma expert Bessel Vander Kolk explains

the ways in which trauma is processed. When we experience trauma it affects our behavior and perception as well as the types of things we are drawn to. Often the brain becomes fixated on distress and seems to compulsively recreate the original event or events of trauma. When someone has experienced something like this it changes the way their brain reacts to future threats. The amygdala is one area in which we interpret a threat. It acts quickly to keep us safe, however, it often interprets danger before we consciously notice what it is interpreting. Our frontal lobes are also responsible for perceiving a threat, they use a slower more effective process. When the frontal lobes try to decipher if we are in danger or not, it takes its time processing the possible threat and makes out what it is. This response in our brain is something that could be activated when we would look up in a dark room and mistake a chair for a monster. Trauma complicates this process, the brain becomes more prone to process stimuli as dangerous. Making the world into a more confusing place than it already was, with things flickering between threatening and safe.

Thinking about it now, my work has always been to do with mental health and emotion. I grew up struggling a lot with my mental health, suffering from anxiety and depression as young as 8 years old. Art has always been a way of coping, and getting the information in my brain out, educating myself on mental health created an understanding of what I was feeling. With my growing interest in psychology and counseling, I have more material and information to base this work on, and mend together the ways in which I process my own pain.

I wanted to capture the experience of trauma through painting. I wanted people to feel anxious, uneasy, and uncomfortable in viewing it, but brought in by the fun colors and highlights I would use. Most of all I wanted to recreate what it feels like to have trauma, and normalize this

experience, but triggering someone is not my intention, which is why I made sure to have warnings outside of the gallery space.

I had a few questions in my line of inquiry: How do those affected by trauma and not affected by trauma differ? Does our impulse to recreate our trauma come through in what imagery we are drawn to? AND can we find some sort of comfort in disturbing imagery? I wanted to explore the feeling of trauma, the different reactions of those with and without trauma to grotesque subject matter, as well as the two ways in which the brain processes danger due to trauma. The questions I was asking were important in the making, but matter less now. I am no longer theorizing what the work should be asking, but interpreting what it is doing. Are viewers able to see their own lives within the piece? That is what matters most now, especially since I personally believe that EVERYONE has some sort of trauma, whether that be nationally, socially, or personally experienced. I wanted this to be a bit of an experiment, and I wouldn't get all of the answers I was looking for until showing the work, and talking to those who came.

I was really interested in the idea of our need to recreate trauma transferring over to imagery we are attracted to. My mom for example is attracted to artwork and media that is more beautiful. She is always asking me to paint flowers (which in a way I did in this piece you're welcome), she finds value in pretty things. Then here I am her daughter, obsessing over paintings made by Francis Bacon, or Goya's Saturn devouring his son. Where you see the god Saturn as nude, dirty, undisturbed towering figure. Mouth wide with the bloodied body of his son. Pieces like this bring me comfort, strangely enough. They reflect the things I feel, don't shy away from difficult subject matter, and make me know that feeling bad was okay.

For this piece I knew some elements that I wanted. Abstracted figures and objects mingling together. I started by making a lot of studies of figures and hands. I drew them in

charcoal and painted over them in oil paint. Abstracting figures in drawing came easily to me since I had been doing it prior, but I wasn't sure how to transfer those mark making techniques over to paint. Those studies informed me, but they were very far from the figures I ended up making. Once I felt worried enough and ready enough, I started the outline for the painting, filling the bottom with what I had worked on the most, figures. I had references from books and old baroque paintings for poses, and started by layering figures on top of each other. This was different than how I had been abstracting figures before, where I had been repeating the same marks as I moved around different poses. Something I struggled with was exactly what subject matter to put in this piece, I went about solving this in a few different ways. The first was by sending out a survey for any PNCA student to fill out. I asked ten questions, the most important being: Do you believe everyone experiences trauma? Do you find you are attracted to media others may find unattractive? What Imagery comes to mind when you think of trauma? And What do you feel when your trauma is triggered? I got 64 responses. 63% of people believed that everyone has experienced trauma, and 84% said that they were attracted to imagery others may find unattractive, and 96% said that they themselves experienced trauma. I used the responses to figure out what feelings and imagery to use in the piece.

For the question of what imagery came to mind, I got varied responses. These were some common themes: things that reminded them of family, men, darkness, chaos, weapons, emptiness, blurred abstract movements, eyes and teeth. Which are staggered throughout.

For the question of "what do you feel when your trauma is triggered", responses were very similar to each other: the most present response being shame. Other common responses were panic and fear.

Majority of the responses I received were focused within the body, which caused me to hit a bit of a wall. I didn't want the piece to be fully figurative. If it was, it wouldn't have had the feeling that I was trying to achieve. This caused me to do something I was avoiding, put my own imagery. I was distancing myself from the subject matter by referencing things that were purely scientific, but that was also limiting the work. I thought that putting any fraction of myself into it would make it too specific and unrelatable. It was a step I needed to take, to make it fun and scary and existing inbetween.

I hung up a large piece of paper to brainstorm my own imagery in relation to trauma. I made lists and decided which things fit and which didn't. To my surprise, The people who looked at it said those specific features made it more relatable. It was something for the viewer to grasp onto and make their own decisions about. This was a big moment for me, and a big shift in the piece, it was starting to get the feeling I was going for and I got really excited. With the outline all done, I thought the hardest part was over, but I was incredibly wrong. Looking at this huge painting with everything mapped out knowing that adding color and depth was next I had no idea how to start. There was so much going on and I wasn't sure what direction to head in. To simplify things for myself I started with pinks and reds and filled in the figures. The shapes I was creating to overlap and fill out the seas of figures began to feel similar to my drawing process, in the packing and layering methods that I used. Once those were far enough along I could figure out how to incorporate other colors and textures. A lot of the process is bouncing off of pre-existing elements to make a balanced composition.

The painting before you is around 6 feet tall and 8 and half feet wide. It's divided into two canvases, but to me the work is one piece. I had planned on making this all on one canvas, but given that I live in a small one bedroom apartment, that would have been a terrible idea for

storing later on. When I am given the opportunity to do whatever I want, I often jump in and go all out. The sizes of my canvases have been growing, but I never had the chance to make something this big before. I needed to, to me, large paintings are immersive, they tower over you, intimidate you, and pull you in. It was important to the piece and I believe it works better than many smaller paintings would with this subject matter given that just like this canvas, trauma can feel over-arching and confronting. Maximalism is another important element of this work, packed compositions always leave me in awe. I have been making work with compositions that mostly exist on one layer, stuffed with repetitive imagery, so this wasn't exceptionally far off for me in this project. It feels overwhelming, in a way that I love and lends itself well to the subject of trauma. I broke the figures down and constructed them by combining detailed areas with fleshy shapes, developing a visual language for certain parts of the body. The figures work in three different ways, the nudity exists as a representation for vulnerability. I depicted them in a way to mimic the feelings that are within the body when trauma is triggered, energy in the arms, dissociation, and scattered vision. Most importantly they act as an entryway for the viewer. They are meant to act as a vessel to hold you, within the work you become the figures, navigating the things existing around you. There is imagery that only exists once within the work, the scissors, dagger, keys, spider, ice cream, rabbit, and pierced ear to name a few. The lack of repetition makes these items hold weight. There is imagery that may be seen as threatening or calming within the piece. To me the objects can be deceiving, the spider could be a symbol of danger and fear to one person, and be comforting and relatable to another. The ice cream which may bring a sweet memory, can represent something menacing or sad. These objects are up for the viewer to interpret as good or bad, and any interpretation is good and okay. The reason walking the line between representation and abstraction works well in this piece is because it can work a bit like a

Rorschach test, our brain will interpret what isn't clear, by using our own experiences. I use pastel colors and shiny highlights as a method to bring the viewer in, the pretty glossy nature of the piece invites you to confront harsh subject matter. Flowers and plants cascade over the top and throughout. I coupled this piece with elements of installation, I grew up going to the Walker art museum a lot, and always loved when work was displayed without just being hung on the wall. Installation can be used as a tool to extend the world of the painting into our world. I wanted people's feelings to shift right when they walked in the room, before even seeing the painting. Red lights to emulate danger, and the sound of a heart beat mimicking the way your heart may feel when trauma is triggered. To me trauma feels a lot like what the past few years have felt like. Chaos, anxiety, and confusion covered the world like a veil, and within that we had to continue somehow with normal life. Doing work, interacting with friends, finding ways to cope. When you have trauma it can feel like this all the time, impending doom mixed with extreme beauty, danger and comfort existing together. This painting is meant to be a bit confusing, and some parts may be impossible to figure out. The way that suffering and pleasure co-exists is confusing to navigate. It can be hard to decipher what is good and what is bad and what will hurt you, and this is even harder to do when you are set up to believe that everything could hurt you.

This painting is how I perceive the world around me. As someone with their own personal trauma, I have such a hard time figuring out how to navigate with it. Every day has instances of fear, anger, confusion, and work. Deciphering what is safe and what is dangerous feels nearly impossible. Its moments like jumping when someone casually runs by me, feeling defensive in interactions that are actually positive, small moments feel like large attacks, minor annoyances can feel like everything is falling apart, I bend myself often to not stir others, and

face anxiety when my attempts at moving around and for others fail. Sometimes clarity can never be reached, and I often fear that a mis-step on my part will end with losing everything. This isn't to say all parts of life are horrible and scary, but that mechanisms that kept you safe at a time, can make the good things in life harder to keep in mind. Like the people who responded to my survey, I can often feel shame around these feelings, and that is incredibly unfortunate.

Struggling with trauma or mental health shouldn't be shameful. What I have experienced personally and what I have watched those around me experience has given me passion for psychology and issues relating to mental health.

To me this work is incredibly successful, I have immense feelings of pride and love for this painting. It gives the feelings that come with trauma a form, and acts as a vessel to understanding those feelings. It can be hard to have a language for mental health, it is something that you have to learn, but images can always hold what words may fail to. This painting does not just act as an ending point of my education, but a step towards my future work. Moving forward I plan to explore more abstraction, more chaos, more crazy mark making, ambiguity mixed with detail, explorations in mental health, neuroscience, and psychology. I am going to grad school to become a therapist, and learn how to merge mental health work with art. Bridging the gap between my background and my future. I am looking forward to what lies ahead. Thank you for listening, I can begin to explain how much it means to me. I will now open it up for questions from the panel, and then the audience.

1. A., V. der K. B. (2015). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books.
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