

an exploration of gestures and pulp painting

Erica Honson

The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA

MFA Book Arts and Printmaking 2022

Thesis Committee Members: Susan Viguers, Lori Spencer, Amanda D'Amico, and Rebecca Gilbert

I attended a school from seventh through twelfth grade that valued and supported both art making and art history. We would learn about an art movement and create works in the same process, be it red-figure pottery, glass mosaic tiles, or abstract expressionist Jackson-Pollock-esque paintings. Throughout our classes, we were also taught how to talk about art using the elements and principles of design. In my last couple years of high school, art and art history were more separated. I remember drawing or painting most of the time, but I also learned wheel throwing, hand building, and sculpting in clay. By the time I graduated high school, I had worked in a wide variety of artistic mediums, I understood the language used to talk and write about art, and I had a general understanding of art history.

In my senior year I started using some of the Adobe programs, and decided to study graphic design at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. In addition to taking classes within our majors, we were required to take 2D and 3D foundations classes as well as art history. I learned basic woodworking, welding, and casting, and I took a figure drawing class almost every semester. This is also when I got more into printmaking; I took every class I could fit in my schedule — etching, screenprinting, relief, digital processes, and letterpress. Learning to print letterpress and make books by hand changed my approach to graphic design. I understood where the rules and conventions came from in practice, before the digital age. Printmaking, and letterpress printing specifically, was the missing piece to a puzzle I wasn't consciously working on. It connected a lot of what I learned before college to what I was majoring in there; it functioned in my mind as a bridge between the historical and contemporary art worlds. After graduating with my BFA in graphic design, I enrolled in the MFA Book Arts and Printmaking program at the University of the Arts. I began to see artmaking as a greater whole, and the lines separating the mediums and processes blurred.

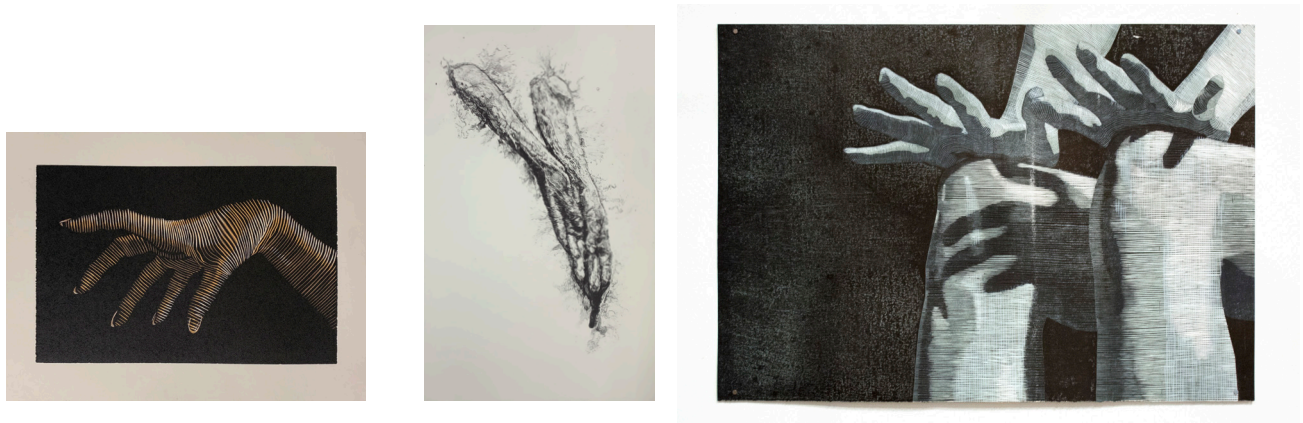
I really enjoy how learning about one medium can open your mind to see new possibilities in another. Throughout my education I began to notice how different mediums would have sometimes contradictory rules about art making, often related to aesthetics and the hierarchy of materials, especially between the worlds of fine art and design. I liked that so many of the venerated contemporary designers were admired for how they broke certain rules or conventions and how the fine artists didn't really have to answer to anyone outside of themselves. I try to erase the borders between fields in my mind when I'm working, combining all the techniques for working in 2D or 3D, digitally or by hand, one of a kind or in the multiple.



If shoeprints in concrete are urban fossils, 2021

In the fall of 2021, I created an edition of artist books called *If shoeprints in concrete are urban fossils*. This was the fifth artist book that I had made, but the first that I felt comfortable and excited about putting out in the world. The book leads the reader through a sequence of vignettes of existential contemplations on meaning and mortality. The prose is introspective, expressing a slight paranoia of being watched, surveilled, and followed. It is letterpress printed on hemp and cotton blend handmade paper with an abaca cover and housed in an enclosure covered with Iris bookcloth and a four-flap Sirio Ultrablack paper tray. The natural color of the fibers was used as the background for pulp paintings inspired by sidewalks and concrete textures. I used mark-making tools and techniques I learned making decorative paste papers to create the pulp paintings. The typography functions as imagery, illustrating movements described in the prose. While the majority of the prose was handset in Italian Oldstyle, the two lines of fleeting thoughts are set in modular letterforms designed and handset using ornaments. I began designing typography in undergrad, and was inspired by Starshaped Press and Springtide Press to apply these digital skills in an analog process. The binding is a variation on an accordion with two sheets joined by

a woven hinge — this is inspired by Claire VanVliet. *If shoeprints in concrete are urban fossils* was written and designed for the reader to step into the narrator's mind. The text is a fragmented and narrated stream of consciousness; the type on a curve suggests movement perceived in the periphery of the narrator while the modular typography implies place. The binding structure transfers the narrator's overwhelming feelings to the reader; the paper is the sidewalk passing beneath the narrator's feet.



Untitled linoleum cut relief, *Untitled* ballgrain lithograph, *Untitled (exhale)* multi-block and color reduction woodcut

Since high school I have been drawing portraits. It has typically been an art practice that I have kept for myself, rarely sharing these drawings, and until this year I haven't really focused on it as my main body of work. While I was developing *If shoeprints in concrete are urban fossils*, I was making a multi block and color reduction woodcut. I was observing people in liminal spaces — the waiting room, the bus stop — and looking for physical manifestations of liminal mental states, looking at body language and hand gestures from people who were between destinations physically and not fully present within their surroundings mentally. I was interested in non-verbal communication of feelings and emotions, evidence of wandering minds, and what a moment of dissociation might look like from the outside.

After creating this woodcut, I thought I would expand it into a series using a variety of print-making processes. As it was the first semester of my second and final year of the MFA Book Arts and Printmaking program, I wanted to continue to explore how a process would influence how I render a figure. In the beginning of 2021, I made a reduction linoleum print, which is what informed the carving of the woodcut. And in the summer of 2021, I made a ballgrain lithograph print. I knew I could also make a lithograph that looked very much like a drawing in graphite or charcoal, but I thought I would

try copper plate etching and aquatint next. I was also trying to find and develop my own visual language — something that felt genuine and not like mimicry — although from the beginning mimicry was how I was taught to make and learn. While I was waiting for materials to arrive, I decided to spend a few days working on a pulp painting. I had been thinking about approaching handmade paper and pulp paint like oil or acrylic on canvas for a while, but since I didn't have access to a paper studio during the pandemic when our facilities were closed, I hadn't been able to do it. Before this I was approaching handmade paper and pulp painting like I would a print, in layers and in the multiple. This ended up leading to the series that became my thesis work.

PROCESS

My first pulp painting is handmade cotton paper, with a pulp poured base sheet and painted with cotton pulp paint. I used the largest mould we have at UArts, approximately 41 x 47 inches, wrapped a wet pellon across the surface of the mould and secured it around the sides and at the corners with clamps. Then I layed down the deckle and deckle box and began pouring water into the deckle box, pouring quickly until I could see standing water across the surface of the mould. Then I poured in buckets of pulp from different sides as I walked around the mould. Keeping the mould flat, I tried to shake it in different directions as one would typically do when pulling a sheet to evenly distribute the fibers, and then waited for the water to drain. When I could no longer see standing water around the sides of the deckle box, I removed it, turned, and tipped the mould so that water could continue to drain from one corner. Pulp pouring and the use of a deckle box are common methods for forming large scale sheets of paper. This was the first time I had made paper at this scale.

When learning pulp painting, I was taught to pull all of your sheets and couch them onto a post, then press the post with the hydraulic press before applying any pulp paint. Because this sheet was too large to press that way, I covered it with another pellon and wet felts and left it to sit overnight. By doing this, more water evaporated from the sheet before I began painting, so the fibers were more compressed and the surface of the sheet was firmer, making it easier to paint on without displacing fibers from the base sheet. I also did not remove the pellon with the formed sheet of paper until after I had finished painting. I moved the mould, pellon and all, onto a table where I could work on it horizontally or stand it up vertically (like how one would usually paint on an easel). I formed the sheet one night, let it rest until morning, and painted on it over the course of the next two days. On the second night I again left it flat

with a wet pellow and felts on top, but this time wrapped it in plastic as well, as one would do to form a wet pack to keep their post from drying.

Traditionally, pulp paint is made with over-beaten cotton, linen, or sometimes abaca. Because of time limitations, the desire to keep the base sheet background untouched, and an inability to erase, I needed to transfer some information onto the wet sheet before I began to paint. To do this, I traced the outline of my image onto Duralar, cut it out, taped it back together with masking tape, and carefully lay this stencil across the paper. Then I remove one piece at a time, lightly tracing the outline in dots with an awl. Paul Wong had shared the taped-together stencil method during a blowout and pulp painting workshop at the University of the Arts, developed for editioning, and the dotted outline was the transfer method used for Italian fresco paintings. As I was adding moisture to the sheet through the pulp paint, it was evaporating from the areas I left unpainted, causing the sheet to begin to dry unevenly, even though I was regularly spraying the whole sheet with water. Cotton is not a high shrinkage fiber, meaning the sheet remains nearly the same dimensions as it dries with minimal cockling, so the uneven drying didn't pose too great a problem. When I finished painting, I removed the pellow still restraining the sheet, transferred it to a wooden frame, and stretched the pellow across it, securing it with clamps. I left it in front of a fan to dry for about 24 hours.

When it came time to choose a direction for my thesis work a couple months later, I floated around some other ideas, but ultimately decided to return to large scale pulp paintings. This cotton pulp painting became the first in a series of nine portraits. The process of experimentation is just as important to me as the content and image making.

Throughout this series, I have been investigating and exploring the range of visual and tactile qualities of fibers used to form a sheet of paper as well as their properties as pulp paint. I'm focusing on fibers used in Western papermaking including cotton, abaca, sisal, kenaf, bamboo, flax, jute, and hemp. Each pulp painting is created using only one fiber for both the base sheet and pulp paint. For this series, the paper is both the substrate and the media, though I am specifically interested in the differences of each fiber's visual qualities and not their qualities as a substrate to hold printed matter.

I approached this series as I was taught to approach a graphic design project with a cohesive system of design decisions. This starts with acknowledging project limitations and outlining general guidelines to inform each artistic decision. I also try to explore and combine controllable processes and uncontrollable ones. In this series, I see two clear examples of each. The pulp painting and the paper that

remained flat after drying were both controlled. The pulp poured base sheet is somewhat uncontrollable in that the fibers move through the water and distribute themselves across the surface of the mould, swirling together in their own fashion. The cockling and warping of the paper is also somewhat uncontrollable. It helps me to identify these things as well as those that I initially perceive as limitations and figure out how to work within them or exploit them.

When I decided to work on this series, I had about eight weeks until we had to install our thesis exhibition. Coincidentally, when I made a list of all the fibers I wanted to use, there were also eight, only one of which I had already used — cotton. Because of how long it took me to paint each one, the base sheet, especially at the corners and around the edges, would dry faster than the area I was painting. Even though I was regularly spraying each sheet with water, they would hold moisture and dry unevenly. I knew that if I kept the fiber wet for too long, it could start to grow mold. So I was both fighting to keep it wet to be able to continue working on it, and not being able to keep it wet for too long.

I had to try a couple different drying methods before I found what worked for me. In short, stretching the finished sheet still restrained on a pella across a wooden frame didn't offer as much support or restraint as I wanted, and drying it flat in a drying box didn't offer enough airflow, so I left the finished sheet restrained on the pella still clamped to the mould and never moved it off the mould after pouring the sheet until it was completely dry. I used the first stretcher method to dry the cotton piece, which worked well enough; however, when I used it to dry the abaca piece, which has a high shrinkage rate, it cockled incredibly. At first I wasn't sure how I felt about it because I was attached to how it looked as I was painting when it was flat; however, I came to appreciate how the cockles added to the objectness of the paper and the tension of the gesture. After the abaca piece, I dried all the rest on the mould as previously described, but only some of the sheets remained restrained until they were fully dry. How a sheet dried was only sometimes controllable, meaning it would only sometimes stay restrained on its own until it was fully dry. When it was acting uncontrollably, peeling off the pella as it dried, I would lightly manipulate the sheets in ways that encouraged what they were already doing. I attempted to manipulate the sisal sheet, but was dissatisfied and had to resolve the piece in a different manner. The lower half of the kenaf sheet was drying much faster than the top half and beginning to warp and curl off the pella. When it was nearly dry I removed the bottom half from the pella for it to finish drying unrestrained and cockle even further, but I left it restrained at the top. I did not manipulate the drying of the cotton, bamboo, or flax pieces. The jute piece remains mostly how it dried naturally, except for the bottom left

corner. When the sheet was fully dry, that corner had curled slightly, and instead of flattening it I sprayed it with water and left it to curl even further. The hemp piece dried in the most unexpected way. I left it, still flat, in front of a fan overnight, and when I arrived the next morning both the top and bottom had lifted off the pella and curled into itself like a cylinder. When I uncurled it, I saw that part of the left and right edges had lifted up too, causing the paper to cockle in rings around the still restrained flat center. In uncurling it, I also found a tear in the background to the left of the figure. I thought it was interesting how the cockling reinforced the hand as the focal point in the painting where it was still flat, so I encouraged that more by lifting up the right half of the sheet, spraying it with water, and letting it dry again, but this time unrestrained.

A major limitation I recognized was the size of the mould. I knew I wanted to work at a scale that has the potential to occupy a lot of a viewer's field of vision and to paint figures that are often larger than life, partially as a kind of confrontation. Scale also adds a degree of abstraction in some of the pieces. The approximately 41 x 47 inch mould is the largest one I had access to at the University of the Arts. I thought these dimensions were well suited to most of the gestures I chose; however, there were a few that didn't want to be so square. The first time I broke from the dimensions of the paper straight from the mould was with the third piece, sisal. The composition didn't feel quite right after I had finished painting it; the base sheet and the silhouette were almost indistinguishable so the hands were floating in a black space, and the paper dried funky, so I decided to cut the hands out of the sheet entirely. I rewet them and dried them in the drying box, where they fit now that they were independent of the sheet. There's nothing physically connecting the two hands, but by being displayed in the same relationship to each other as they were painted, the edge of the original sheet is still implied. Then I broke the dimensions in a different way with the fifth and sixth pieces, bamboo. I had been thinking about including these two gestures at different points earlier, but they weren't suited to the original dimensions of the mould without modifications. I realized I could paint them two-up — in printing this means creating two images with one impression — resulting in two separate pieces. The seventh piece, flax, I also painted two-up, but I instead used the two halves to form one piece. And finally, the eighth and ninth pieces, jute and hemp respectively, each use a whole sheet, but they are a diptych within the series, always to be displayed together — two whole sheets used to create one final piece. By connecting them at the corner, I have maximized the scale at which I could paint the final gesture. I also tore the hemp piece along the edge of the silhouette, somewhat like how I modified the sisal piece. Another rule I have for myself in my work is that if I'm

going to do something, I'd better do it at least twice. I exploited the dimensions of the mould maybe more often than I stuck to it, but mostly keeping with rectangles and straight edges. So while I needed a work around for a complication in the drying of the hemp piece, I also needed another organic edge to complement and justify the decision to cut out the hands in the sisal piece.

While the act of pulp painting was mostly controllable, I had to adapt how I was painting to suit the properties of the different pulp paint made with each fiber. Short, overbeaten fibers are traditionally used in pulp paint. When a fiber is overbeaten, the resulting sheet can be much more translucent than when the fibers are beaten less, and therefore remain longer. For example, cotton stays fairly opaque; however, abaca can be as translucent as tracing paper. Each fiber also retains pigment differently, and different fibers were easier to paint on than others. Cotton and sisal were by far the easiest to work with and with the fewest surprises; kenaf, too. I know other papermakers like abaca pulp paint; however, it was a little more difficult to work with here because I was painting on an abaca base sheet as well. A wet sheet of abaca paper has kind of a slimy surface, although it has great wet strength. Artists love working with the wet sheets for casting; however, I found it to be difficult to paint vertically as I did all the rest. The rest of the fibers behaved well enough while I was painting; however, they did not maintain the integrity of the values I painted after they dried. The bamboo and flax pieces are the extremes here; both dried much more translucent than how they looked when wet. Traditionally, pulp paint is only used while the base sheet is still wet. And there is a risk of cockling when any moisture is added to the paper after it has dried. However, I was dissatisfied with the results, knowing what they had looked like before. Watercolor artists prevent cockling by taping their paper around the edges to restrain it, so I left these pieces restrained on the pella and continued to apply pulp paint after they had dried.

INFLUENCES & INSPIRATIONS



The Death of Marat by Jacques-Louis David, *The Desperate Man* by Gustave Courbet, *Portrait of Clémentine (Mrs. Alphonse) Karr* by Henry Lehmann



The Barber of Suez by Léon Bonnat, *The Truth Coming Out of Her Well to Shame Mankind* by Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Tired Gleaner* by Jules Breton



Young Peasant Girl with a Jug on a Sea Background, *The Haymaker*, *Asleep In The Woods*, and *The Song of the Lark* by Jules Breton

I've always loved paintings made during and between the Romanticist and Realist movements, and in compiling a list of my favorite paintings I realize many are by late 18th through late 19th century French artists. I'm attracted to their formal qualities, the treatment of light, the graceful gestures, and the rendering of the human form. During this time period, portraits and representational paintings expressed a tension between the ideal/fantasy and the real — I think the clearest way to understand this is to look at what these paintings emphasize. Some are almost theatrical, illustrative, possibly inspired by a story or a myth, with expressive body language and almost performed emotions — these depict an embellishment or romanticization of reality, or a fantasy. And some look more genuine and natural, not posed — these depict a reality. I'm looking at artists like Jacques-Louis David (Neoclassicist), Gustave Courbet (Realist), Henri Lehmann (Realist), Jean-Léon Gérôme (Academicist, read: romanticist/neoclassicist), Léon Bonnat (Realist), and Jules Breton (Realist/Naturalist).

Of those artists, I think Jules Breton's paintings exemplify that tension between the ideal and the real best. Also, I like the way he depicted working class women and girls. He presents them laboring in the fields, fetching water, feeding children, and when he shows them resting they gaze off into the distance almost as if they're dreaming. They're not carefree, they're not passive, they're fully clothed and essential, possibly respected, members of their families and communities. They may be plain, as in not fancy, but they are by no means simple beings. The women in other portraits like these are more object than subject, contrary to Breton's paintings. His paintings were some of the first I saw where it appeared that the artist had revered his female subjects. What resonates most with me about his paintings is what he did not or could not paint. Even though so much of his work shows people laboring, he instills his paintings with a sense of humanity and of sonder, which the Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows defines as "the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own." I remember when I first discovered his work in high school how much I related to his subjects physically, going through the motions of their real lives, laboring, while mentally seeming anywhere but there. *The Song of the Lark* might be my favorite. He doesn't show the beauty of the lark, but rather the beauty of appreciating its song with the sun rising in the background as if reminding us that a new day is always just beyond the horizon — it's quietly hopeful, but not overly optimistic. In these works the landscape and context are important in understanding the content.



The People and Hunger by Kathe Kollwitz

Kathe Kollwitz was living and producing art during both the first and second World Wars. Much of her work is about the human condition, depicting the working class traumatized by poverty and war. Though she also made etchings and lithographs, I'm most familiar with her woodcuts. Both *The People* and *Hunger* are single layer woodcuts printed in black on a white or light colored paper, with a powerful use of mark-making, composition, and negative space. In *The People*, there is some visual tonal value created by the carved lines in the central adult figure, but the majority of the faces were rendered with flat black and white shapes. At the bottom of the image, a hand emerges from the solid black mass of bodies, partly covering a child's big-eyed face as if protecting its innocence. In *Hunger*, the chatter and roughly carved silhouette makes it look like her clothes are tattered. In both of these prints, the marks and hatching give it a sense of urgency and tension. The stark contrast between the black and white of the ink and paper pull the viewer's focus directly to the figures' bodies. They're emotional, poignant, and powerful. Kollwitz' work has made me think more about how much information is needed in an image for it to be effective.



You Have to Kill a Whole to Get a Little (top) and *Regiment* (bottom) by Sophie Jodoin

Kollwitz and Sophie Jodoin both include much less context than Breton in their work, and sometimes in similar ways combining flat silhouettes with fully rendered elements. Jodoin also makes work about the effects of war on humanity, as in *You Have to Kill a Whole to Get a Little*. In her project statement, she writes that this series “shows the moral and physical suffering of war, but also the trials of childhood and daily life.” This series was made with drawing, photography, and video. I’ve long admired her work, partially because the way she usually works in series makes so much sense to me. In *Regiment*, Sophie Jodoin drew/painted 64 torsos. Each one is truncated just below the stomach, where it feels there is a natural line separating the body, and each face cut off in a straight line just below the eyes. The figures are all nude, nearly anonymous, but by including part of the face they are presented still as individuals and not just their bodies. This piece, she says in her project statement, “provides an almost scientific, sociological record of people.” In art history classes I remember seeing how artists could tell a whole story in

one image. It continues to impress me; I don't often see things or think that clearly. But through a series there's room to not know. This is something I learned from her work — that everything doesn't have to be in each and every piece, especially within a series. I appreciate the space for some things to be left unsaid, at least sometimes.



The Martyr and The Burghers of Calais (study) by Auguste Rodin

Seeing Auguste Rodin's sculptures in person feels like I'm discovering something new about myself or reconnecting with a piece of someone or something I lost — maybe something we've lost from ourselves. Rodin has a masterful way of articulating hands, feet, and muscles with a clear understanding and appreciation for anatomy, both seen and unseen. I got to see *The Martyr* and a study for *The Burghers of Calais*, along with many others, at the Museo Soumaya.

The Martyr is a figure lying nearly on its back with its legs gently bent and twisted in such a way that they are in the air and not directly supported by the pedestal. The head and left arm are also spilling over the edge. It looks precarious — I stifled the impulse to catch it or to pull its arms back across its chest. He captures moments that are otherwise unseen and creates a sense of movement in moments when I imagine the figure in reality is pretty still. When I got back to where I was staying, I layed on the bed and reenacted this piece, feeling the tension in my hips trying to get my legs into this position and feeling my hand go numb as my elbow hyperextended.

CONTENT

When I work representationally, I put myself in the position to feel where the tension is in my body and respond to it, whether or not I will be using my body as a reference for the piece. My sense of self is more intertwined with my hands than my face. To the world, our face is our identifier, but I associate my identity more so with my hands. Drawing helps me process the world around me, my hands help me process, and without them I think I would have a much more difficult time understanding my experiences. Maybe in losing them I would lose myself. I pay attention to how people use their hands, and sometimes that makes more sense to me than how they use their words. I found Quintilian, a Roman educator and rhetorician, quoted in *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*; he says:

the hands may almost be said to speak. Do we not use them to demand, promise, summon, dismiss, threaten, supplicate, express aversion or fear, question or deny? Do we not use them to indicate joy, sorrow, hesitation, confession, penitence, measure, quantity, number and time? Have they not the power to excite and prohibit, to express approval, wonder, shame? (Cooper 78)

During my undergraduate figure drawing classes, I'd start with the angles of the shoulders and the hips, work out the torsos, find the angles between joints, draw the contour lines, and roughly block out the feet. By the end of the pose, I often, and conveniently, didn't have time to figure out the hands. Someone once told me that some artists only draw poses where the hands aren't visible or draw surrealist tendrils for fingers instead, suggesting I should stop leaving all my figures dismembered. They said I had to figure out how to hide them, reimagine them, or draw them as they are. Ignoring a difficult thing was no longer a viable option, which was and is true for me beyond the drawing of hands. So, outside of class I started almost exclusively drawing my hands and almost obsessively, but discreetly, observing the movements of other people's hands.

I started noticing people's hands contradicting their faces or words — like a clenched fist and a smile or fidgety hands and a confident voice. I have enjoyed people-watching for a long time, and find it fascinating how much we communicate non-verbally. I'm interested in the things that are left unsaid, the missing pieces, how we edit ourselves, and how our body language can expose us.

Years ago there was a popular TED Talk circulating in which Amy Cuddy asserts that standing in a power pose can actually boost confidence by increasing testosterone and cortisol levels (Cuddy). Likewise, standing in a low power position can decrease confidence and increase feelings of doubt. Body

language can influence emotion. I wondered, could adopting a position that communicates an emotion help a person to reconnect with and process that emotion? I imagine this has some connection to practices such as yoga and meditation. This might have in part inspired me to act out *The Martyr*.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is possibly my favorite play, not that I have read or seen all that many, and something I think of often. I see Godot everywhere, or rather I notice his absence. Godot is the SEPTA bus late at night; he is the judge that is scheduled to show up at the jail every four hours for arraignments; he is the change towards a future we simultaneously dream of, work towards, and mourn. Sometimes I am Godot, telling friends I'll try to make it to their gatherings and if not this one, definitely the next. But more often we are all Vladimir and Estragon, simply waiting. Beckett captures a restlessness in these men as they wait, switch boots, debate why the boots are smaller, if they are even their boots, if the tree is the same tree... . They question their perception of the world and their memory of it — something I think we all do, however more often than not introspectively and unintentionally. It is somewhere maybe our subconsciousness takes us when we're not paying attention. When our minds drift, our awareness of our surroundings lessens and we become in some ways more vulnerable until we come back into ourselves. It is within those moments I see in other people that I also sometimes see myself — floating. By inventing stories about them and what they're thinking or going through in their lives, we may subconsciously begin to relate to them through our projections. I think this sometimes helps in processing our emotions.

EXPLORATIONS OF GESTURES AND PULP PAINT



explorations of gestures and pulp paint (1) cotton, (2) abaca, (3) sisal, (4) kenaf, (5) bamboo, (6) bamboo, (7) flax, (8) jute and (9) hemp diptych



Over the course of the past couple years I have been sketching gestures that resonated with me or writing myself a note about them. Some of them I see often, some of them I only witnessed once or twice. I'm drawing the majority of my gestures from those I witness in my daily life — people I pass on the street, waiting next to me at a bus stop or on the bus, people I see in parks or coffee shops, in conversations with others or on their own. Some gestures may come from different media, like in art, movies, or television shows — performed emotions. Some gestures I've witnessed performed by my friends or family. And some may be modifications or combinations of gestures I witness. Then I perform the gestures on my own, holding the positions and taking note of where I'm holding tension in my body, and in doing so trying to understand where someone else was holding this tension in theirs. It's a kind of an introspective interrogation of the gestures not just to try to understand the emotion behind it but also to provoke an emotion within myself. I want to know what people are thinking and feeling — that which they do not communicate orally or verbally. I decided which gestures would be included in this series at the start of each new painting, dependnig on which was resonating with me or haunting me that week. I'm interested in what is conveyed by individual images and what larger narrative is created through looking at them in series. Towards the end I tried to plan more and fill in holes in a narrative I saw emerging, so it's not entirely random, but it remains vague and devoid of a greater context, at least to the viewer.

I excluded gendered anatomy in an attempt to queer the body and exhume the gestures from the confines of a strictly identity-based analysis. There's a pattern in portraits throughout history where the men are looking directly at the viewer and the women are looking in another direction. In portraits that fall within this scope, the men confront the viewer by returning their gaze, while the women are the ob-

ject of the viewer's gaze and may or may not have an object of their own gaze, inconsequentially. When I decided in which perspective to capture each gesture, I had the theoretical concept of the male gaze in mind. Viewers perceive most of these gestures as feminine, and only two as masculine — the kenaf piece and the jute and hemp diptych — because they are more confrontational. My decisions were not, however, based on how it relates to gender, but rather how it relates to power, force, and authority.

Many of the portraits in this series are perceived as reflecting some amount of stress or anxiety, possibly intensified by the cockling of the paper. They are also perceived to be depicting reflection itself, or introspection. The most controversial responses have been to the flax piece. Some see it as representing abject desperation, while others see it as open, vulnerable, and possibly optimistic. I think I appreciate the response to this piece the most, that fact that people see both hope and hopelessness. Our assumptions on what emotion is being communicated is based on our own personal experiences. When it comes to the meaning of a gesture without context, I appreciate that we both don't know and can't know its significance.

While portraits usually include faces, I have redacted the faces by painting only their silhouettes or by cropping them out of the image entirely. With the hands rendered realistically in full value, they become the focal point instead. The absence of a face asserts that the identity of the subject isn't important for the viewer to know. I am not painting portraits of people; I am painting portraits of their gestures, and possibly their emotions. In figuring out the composition of each piece, I had three elements to consider: the hands et cetera fully rendered, the rest of the figure in silhouette, and the background. The only constant in each is fully rendered hands. The silhouette and background are variables, often both included, but not always or not always in the same way. The scale of the figures is variable as well; most of the figures are larger than life, as I initially intended them to be, but not all. Because of limitations imposed on the pieces by the dimensions of the mould, I prioritized the formal elements of the composition over the scale.

One thing I would not compromise was the decision to work in grayscale. There is some variation due to the natural color of each fiber, so some pieces are warmer than others, but I felt and still feel strongly that it would have been wrong to use any pigment other than black or white. Color could imply an emotion, and especially here they would be inextricable. Color could give context, which would be too much information. They needed to be painted in grayscale; using color would be like drawing a conclusion. These portraits are inconclusive; each is a fragment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bonnat, Léon. 1876. *The Barber of Suez*. Oil on canvas.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1959. *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*. London: Faber.
- Breton, Jules Adolphe. 1877. *Asleep In The Woods*. Oil on canvas.
- Breton, Jules Adolphe. 1875. *Tedder Seated at the Edge of a Wood*. Oil on canvas.
- Breton, Jules Adolphe. 1884. *The Song of the Lark*. Oil on canvas.
- Breton, Jules Adolphe. 1880. *The Tired Gleaner*. Oil on canvas.
- Breton, Jules Adolphe. 1890. *Young Peasant Girl with a Jug on a Sea Background*. Oil on canvas.
- Cooper, Jean Campbell. 1978. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols / J.C. Cooper*. London: Thames And Hudson.
- Courbet, Gustave. 1843-45. *The Desperate Man*. Oil on canvas.
- Cuddy, Amy. 2012. "Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are." Ted.com. TED Talks. June 2012. https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_may_shape_who_you_are?language=en.
- David, Jacques-Louis. 1793. *Death of Marat*. Oil on canvas.
- Gérôme, Jean-Léon. 1896. *The Truth Coming Out of Her Well to Shame Mankind*. Oil on canvas.
- Jodoin, Sophie. 2006. *Regiment*. <https://www.sophiejodoin.com/#/regiment/>
- Jodoin, Sophie. 2011. *You have to kill a whole to get a little / Tant de morts pour si peu*. <https://www.sophiejodoin.com/#/test/>
- Kollwitz, Käthe. 1922. *The People*. Woodcut. Tate Modern, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kollwitz-the-people-p82465>
- Kollwitz, Käthe. 1923. *Hunger*. Woodcut. Leicester Museum and Art Gallery. <https://www.germanexpressionismleicester.org/leicesters-collection/artists-and-artworks/kaethe-kollwitz/hunger/>
- Lehmann, Henri. 1845. *Portrait of Clémentine (Mrs. Alphonse) Karr*.
- "Philadelphia Museum of Art - Rodin's Hands." 2022. Philadelphia Museum of Art. 2022. <https://philamuseum.org/calendar/exhibition/rodins-hands>.
- Rodin, Auguste. 1885. *The Martyr*. Bronze.
- Rodin, Auguste. 1884–89. *The Burghers of Callais*. Bronze.
- "Sonder." 2019. *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*. 2019. <https://www.dictionaryofobscuresorrows.com/post/23536922667/sonder>.
- Wong, Paul. Workshop at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA. Fall 2019.