

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS
ART DEPARTMENT

Painful Yet Tender

BFA Degree Thesis Exhibition Report

Presented to the BFA Degree Committee:

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Around ten years ago, I started college with the intent to become an art major. Sometimes that's just how long it takes a person to finish a degree. I've known since I was a child that I not only wanted to make art, but that I wanted to study it and have it be an active part of my life. As an adult, I have taught children's art classes, have had my art in shows around town, including the 64th Parallel, and was the "resident art student" at Michaels for seven years. If a customer had a question about anything related to art, the other staff members would direct them to me. After I left that job, the staff continued to ask me for help for a full year when they would see me buying art supplies. My artwork has taken influences from places like the fever-dream music of Will Wood, the smoke-like linework of Alphonse Mucha, guro artists like Kaneoya Sachiko, and the vibrant colors of Lisa Frank.

Jamie told me in the first class I ever took with him that I should be a BFA student. As a part-time student with very little money and a lot of chronic health issues, I wasn't sure I could do it. Due to circumstance, the semester I finally applied was the semester that lockdown went into effect. When I talk with other BFA students, there's a special kinship between those of us who started during or just after the COVID-19 lockdown. It's hard to briefly encapsulate everything that made starting the program in this era strange and difficult, but I distinctly remember two things I was told by fellow community members at the time. "When I applied for my degree, I was able to walk in and see examples." and "Students don't usually break until the end of the semester. But it's happening so much faster now."

I'm very thankful for all the support the faculty has given me and my fellow degree seekers, especially as someone who's chronic illnesses got significantly worse post-lockdown and as someone who has had a lifelong struggle with their mental health.

My art has always dealt with themes of emotional and physical pain. And I've always had a keen awareness that being open about these things helps other people to be open about them as well. The ability for art to be both a personal and communal experience is very special. I set out at the start of my degree to develop my ability to communicate my experiences with pain, trauma, and dissociation through my artwork. My intention was to do so in a way that could be understood by both people with first hand experience and by people who are unfamiliar with these feelings.

As I worked towards this goal I developed my understanding of the feelings I was trying to communicate. I narrowed in on a specific type of experience I was most interested in exploring. My show became about the painful yet tender ways I, as a person with complex dissociative trauma and associated chronic pain, interact with myself.

Everyone has a relationship with their body and with the differing parts of their identity, which can get very complicated very quickly. My relationship with myself has an extra layer of complication because of my Dissociative Identity Disorder. Also known as DID, Dissociative Identity Disorder forms when a child experiences prolonged trauma. The trauma keeps the child from forming a unified identity. Their brain instead puts up dissociative barriers between the parts of the self that remember the trauma, parts that don't remember, and parts that only know enough to keep the rest of them safe. As the child grows up, these separate parts of the self also grow up. They often grow up to be

their own unique selves, who may or may not know about the other identities (also known as 'alters') who live with them. As adults, we have to learn how to work together as a system of alters to succeed in life and find happiness. And, in my case, complete our degree.

Because of this, the conversations I have with myself are often more literal than the ones people without DID (or the related disorder OSDD-1) have with themselves. My show is specifically focused on the interactions between the parts of the self who are struggling with pain in self-destructive ways, and the parts of self who are attempting to soothe them. These conversations are often messy, uncomfortable, and demand the kind of self-love that is unfazed by open aggression- or even active self harm.

This is especially true when a part that typically self harms is attempting to reach out and help another part who is in pain. They often do not know what kindness looks like or how gentle touch feels. So they grip and shout in the only ways they know how, doing their best to help. There is pain in every interaction on both sides. But there is also deep tenderness.

Some things are easier to understand when they are seen, and so these exchanges are depicted semi-literally. The work featured in this show is heavily focused on human-like bodies in surreal colors and arrangements, soaked through with their emotions. While chronic pain is understood to be a physical thing, what many don't realize is that trauma is also held in the body. The figures in my work are expressing both through form, color, and narrative.

The show consists of two stand-alone watercolors, three stand-alone acrylic paintings, and an eleven page comic done in watercolor and ink. There is some style

drift between them, and between different pages of the comic, because they were done by different groups of alters in my system. The alter, the “part of self”, who is out the most frequently is typically called the host. Our host, Danie, contributed to all of the art pieces and is the primary writer of this paper. However, they were not the primary artist on most of the pieces.

The acrylic painting, *We Know You*, was mostly painted by a reclusive and shy alter named Luka. It is part of a larger series he did of red human-like bodies on blue backgrounds. *We Know You* is of two human-like figures reaching out to one another. One has teeth and the other has eyes and together they have a complete face. Luka’s rendering style is thick, blocky, and it revels in visible brush strokes. Luka was originally only interested in acrylic but was eventually, with a lot of resistance and complaining, convinced to try watercolor. After helping to paint the comic pages, he decided that watercolor is actually pretty enjoyable.

Relaxing is a Pain Unto Itself / Yes, But There is Such a Thing as a Relieving Pain, also known as *Relieving Pain*, was a group effort by Danie, Luka, and an alter named Marc. The painting is taller than it is wide, and features two people. One sits, hair and eyes wild, staring at the viewer. The other combs the sitting person’s hair with their back facing the viewer, too focused on the calming action to notice anyone else. The scene is inspired by internal acts of caretaking between Marc and other, more emotionally vulnerable alters. Though these interactions happen in our mind, they have tangible effects on how we feel and are very important to our wellbeing.

The last acrylic, *Still / Still Pulled / Still Retching*, is the only painting in the show done by a very social alter named Wendelin. It has a noticeably different style and a much lighter color palette than most of the other pieces. She accidentally ended up being in control, also known as fronting, during one of our studio sessions. Wen

completed about two thirds of the painting and did not come back out during our next studio session, leaving Danie to complete it. When asked by Danie what technique she had used, she said “I drew with the paint” and did not feel the need to elaborate further. She does not consider herself a painter, and instead primarily works in dry mediums like pencil. The painting depicts three people, sketched out with acrylic in neons and blues, overlapping each other. One is pulled by the face by an outstretched hand, one is holding their own face and retching, and the third is buckling over as they are pulled by the face and neck by outstretched hands.

The other two stand-alone paintings are watercolors, and were both primarily drawn by Danie. *The Fall/The Catch* is a square painting with a person falling backwards as they're gripped on the arms, neck, and jaw by two sets of hands that are catching them in a rough manner. It was painted partially by Danie, but was mostly painted by Marc and another social alter named Lan. The face has a slightly more realistic color scheme (especially on the cheeks and mouth), similar to the other stand-alone painting Marc worked on. However, Lan's preference for using unreal, emotionally driven colors in place of normal skin tones won out in the rest of the rendering.

Lan did most of the painting on the other stand-alone watercolor, *I'm Pulling as Much as I Can, Sorry I've only One Hand*, with some help from Danie. Lan attempted to convince Luka to help as well, but the most Luka was willing to do at that time was give the piece its name. The painting is of a gold-green hand grasping a deep blue hand, pulling it out of a murky darkness. They are surrounded by other hands that are attempting to reach for help, their fingers twisted into painful shapes, but they have to

wait their turn. There are lines of bright pink and red where the hands grip each other. Lan's love of layered, dramatic lighting in his watercolors is on full display in this painting.

The eleven page full color comic was our biggest group-effort. All of the alters previously mentioned helped with one or multiple aspects of its creation, from conception to print. Other alters helped as well, but the most surprising one to contribute was an alter named Vance. Vance does not consider himself an artist and has had a rough, complicated history with the rest of the system- and with our college career. However, as painting the pages began to take over our life, he chose to help because it was important to Danie.

The comic, *Against the Floor*, follows a system of alters shortly after experiencing a traumatic event in adulthood. Each alter is having their own reaction and needs to lean on the others for the health of the whole, but that is difficult when communication between them is fragmented and occasionally abrasive. The characters and events of the comic are semi-autobiographical but are not taken directly from our real life, or our real system. Because of the comic's subject matter and short page count, we felt it best to take inspiration from real life but to construct a fictional story and fictional characters for the sake of narrative flow and privacy. The alters featured in the comic are not part of our real-world system, though they do resemble some of our alters and their dynamics.

Against the Floor begins with the system's host, Walter, in a therapy session, discussing an accident that occurred outside of their workplace. The therapist asks how the other alters in the system are handling it. Walt says that everyone's okay, but Crane has "been on the floor". What he doesn't tell the therapist is that Crane appears to be

dead. Alters cannot die, but immense stress can cause them to perceive themselves as dead. Walt goes back to work the next day, trying to ignore the other alters attempting to get his attention. However, he dissociates and switches out with another alter, Killian, after reading that the recent accident resulted in a death. Coming back to awareness at home, Walt can't ignore the others any longer. Sharp, an aggressive and protective alter, screams that Walt needs to stop selfishly ignoring Crane's attempts to ask him for help. Shaken by this, Walt decides to push past his fear of Crane's anguish and corpse-like state to comfort her. The final page is Walt tenderly cradling Crane as she weakly looks up at him.

All of the pieces featured in the show use form to express tenderness and pain. Form meaning both the quality of line and paint, and the positions the figures are rendered in. The acrylic works have a dense paint application that exaggerates the thick and thin parts of its twisting bodies. The watercolor and ink pieces have bodies that are equally morphed to twist into positions that express pain and an unfamiliarity with human movement. The vast majority of the reference photos used for all of the work were taken of our body- particularly of our hypermobile hands.

Color is a longstanding passion of ours and we took great care with what colors were used in the works featured in this show. An emphasis was put on placing blisteringly bright, warm colors against deep or desaturated cool colors. When dark or desaturated colors are used in backgrounds and shadows, they are used to articulate the nothingness between isolated shapes in your imagination. Feelings can be so powerful that they erode context, aside from the forms they are being expressed

through. When a flesh tone is desaturated, it also hints towards an emptiness. However, it more directly references a feeling of being dead.

The bright colors are often bright enough to start hurting the eyes. They also tend to be warm colors, like pinks, reds, and yellows. The bright colors feel alive compared to the cool tones, and represent active emotions. Red specifically refers to guilt and physicalized pain. Many of the figures are 'red handed', with red on the pads of their fingers and under the nails. The figures in *We Know You* are entirely red, mistaking their red bodies for proof of guilt. Meanwhile, pink is sweetness and love, and is found in spots where the figures touch each other. It's often so bright that it becomes painful to the eye and is easily mistaken for red.

Color is used very similarly in the comic, but only when a character or panel is in a mental space rather than a real-world one. When a character is in a real-world space, the palette becomes warmer and uses more earth-tones. The palette then shifts into the surreal colors used in the standalone pieces when the characters move into the mental space, and they have to gradually 'warm back up' when they come back to reality.

Narrative is most obvious in the comic but it is present in the stand-alone works as well. The compositions in the stand-alone works are designed with the position of the audience in mind. Some of them, like *Relieving Pain*, make the audience part of the scene by acknowledging and including them. In that piece, the sitting figure is looking at the viewer with a shrouded glare as they struggle to let their guard down during a vulnerable moment. Some of the other paintings also position the audience so they are watching an otherwise private moment. Meanwhile, other pieces like *I'm Pulling as*

Much as I Can, Sorry I've only One Hand place the viewer so they stand where a body part would be connected to.

The compositions found in the comic are intended to take the viewer on a journey through reality and unreality. Its figures are rendered more fluidly and chaotically as they pass into a space dominated by thought and emotion. The comic's pacing has also been taken into account so that sudden, sharp changes in mood can be discovered as the reader turns the page. For example, the splash page of the character Crane laying on a dark, red floor is set up on page two and revealed when the reader turns to page three.

This degree and this show have been a huge group project with myself. I have had to learn how to navigate my different workflows and how to manage when my body needs a break, even when it's inconvenient. I have found ways to visually articulate my experiences by not only discussing the art work with my peers and BFA committee, but by also looking inward and discussing it with myself. The better I understand myself, the better I become at sharing those things with others.

I have also learned a great deal about comic making. This is the first comic I have made that is over three pages long, the second one made with a detailed outline, and the first I have prepped for production. I feel much more prepared for making a comic that is visually interesting and within the limits of what my body will allow me to do- and I have a better understanding of what pace it will allow me to do it at.

I have also pushed myself to work in larger sizes in mediums I wasn't used to working big in. These are the largest watercolors I have made, and some of the largest acrylics I have done. While I don't think I will do full-color comics at this size again in the

near future, I have found that I adore doing stand alone paintings and drawings in large sizes. I intend to continue experimenting with canvases and papers larger than the ones featured in this show. And while that is intimidating, it is also exciting. I was surprised at how important scale was to the subject matters I want to explore.

This degree has been demanding on my body and has been, at times, emotionally difficult. But I am so happy that I and my system put the work in to complete it.