A Thesis is Not a Diary and Other Myths

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“Because emotion’s just so terrifying the world refuses to believe that it can be pursued as discipline, as form” (Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*)

“Life is not personal” (Giles Deleuze, *Dialogues*)

**Introduction**

How do you write about a feeling you do not understand? How do you organize what is purposefully messy? How can you name a ghost of something that you push into the world with your hands? In this thesis, I will explain my practice, form, and material as a way to illuminate my art, along with various readings and philosophies that I use to guide the work. My work explores my life and visual landscape, mainly through abstract painting and sculpture. I paint, draw, and sculpt from what is personal to me, yet I connect to others through shared experiences and feelings. Drawing from the philosophy of Giles Deleuze, and in particular, the quotation “Life is not personal”, I explore how the viewer can engage with my art, which is a private diary made public.¹ People are connected by a commonality of feeling; anger, excitement, trauma, passion. Our experiences are often shared and intertwined, even as we perceive to experience them alone, and take pride in our uniqueness. I push the viewer to immerse themselves in the world I have created, an abstract landscape filled with bright color, repeating patterns, and expressive brushwork. It is filled with color, twisted figures and painterly lines. I am honest in

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my work through a practice of drawing and writing in a diary daily, this feeds directly into my presented works, and invites the viewer to take their own emotions seriously, and engage in the political act of sharing. As Chris Kraus says, “The personal pursued for its own sake is no good. The "I" is only useful to the point that it gets outside itself, gets larger.”

In this thesis I will explain how my diaristic work is a political tool and not just a personal exploration, and how I use this to guide my physical and conceptual processes. I work through themes of girlhood, romance, abstract emotion, and childhood memory within the framework of “personal” art, in order to engage with imagery connected to femininity, and elevate the voices of women and girls.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

*Read My Diary*

One of the main inspirations in my work is the book *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus; a somewhat autobiographical text about the authors all-consuming obsession with Dick Hebdige, a friend and colleague of her husband. The book charts Kraus’ fascination with him through a diary, essays, and letters between them. In this text, Kraus treats emotion as something to be is investigated, to be revered and embraced for all its ugly, messy, and intense parts. Kraus looks directly into the face of her obsession and works to understand and engage with it. She is a reader of Deleuze, and engages with his philosophy around the shared aspects of experience. Her work introduced me to his philosophy, and she often uses it to guide conversations about her writings and filmmaking. She states that her work is not confessional, but relatable because her

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3 Kraus, Chris. *I Love Dick*. Semiotext(e), 1998.
experiences are things that happen to everyone. Upon its publication in 1997, *I Love Dick* received mixed reviews, critics thought of it as gossipy and overly personal, and it was not respected as an academic text. I found this book eye-opening and contemporary, Kraus highlights the way that sexism operates today in upper class art circles and academia. Not only that, but Kraus confronts the dominant narrative of 90’s feminism, one where women must appear strong, neutral, and professional in order to be respected. Kraus is looking for respect in the supposed wrong ways, her novel is self-hating; an extravagant personal diary, outlining her attempts to seduce Dick. Reading Kraus inspired me to seriously engage with the grittiness of emotion; to engage with lust, anger, and dissatisfaction in my work, and take myself seriously as an artist and writer. Kraus’ book allowed me to engage deeper with my own practice of writing and drawing in a diary, and solidified it as an important and valid aspect of my practice.

My work has expanded and grown outward from the idea of diary-art, and I look to other artists who work with personal or “private” content, such as Louise Bourgeois, Dorothy Iannone, Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, Cecily Brown, and Kiki Smith. These are all female artists who approach their work from a place of personal experience, family history, women's bodies, sexuality, and identity. Dorothy Iannone is a painter born in 1933 who worked primarily with erotic imagery and cliqued images such as hearts, stars and birds. She painted directly from her experience, and incorporated folk art elements into her work, I look to her paintings to guide my work including symbols, figures, and repeated images.

Many painters influence my abstract work, specifically Cecily Brown, Joan Mitchell and Cy Twombly. All of these painters work in abstraction, yet have a traditional background in

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drawing and paintings, I look to them for visual inspiration, as well as process-based influence. Joan Mitchell often paints from landscapes, though one might not be able to tell this looking at her work, while Cecily Brown paints from a myriad of imagery, mainly from figural and classical images. My painting *Winter Fruit* (2019) was based on a photo of a pond in winter light, and was inspired directly by the work of Joan Mitchell. In this piece I was painting from landscape, and also working to evoke contrasting emotions by pairing soft pastel colors with scratchy brushwork and a few dark strokes of paint.

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Another artist who influences my work is sculptor Louise Bourgeois. She was born in 1911 in France, and worked with metal, wood, fabric and other material. Bourgeois worked directly from her family and childhood memories, themes in her work are anger, fear, motherhood, and love. She says “A work of art doesn’t have to be explained. If you do not have any feeling about this, I cannot explain it to you. If this doesn’t touch you, I have failed.” Bourgeois way of working is inspiring to me because I also create from what is emotional to me, and push the viewer to have a visceral reaction when coming into contact with my work.

I look to all these artists, and many others, for both visual and conceptual inspiration, specially painters and sculptors who work in a feminist art tradition. I look at painters particularly because looking at paintings while I work helps ground me in the practice and language that is unique to this art. Other painters that inspire me are Nina Chanel Abney, Anna Retulainen, Christina Quarles, Baya Mahieddine, Laura Owens, and Joan Snyder. All of these artists are female artists, both historical and contemporary. Their work ranges from graphic and stylistic to painterly or folk art styles. In looking to these artists, I draw inspiration from their practice, techniques, and styles and incorporate elements of their work into my own.

**Medium and Techniques**

*Scratching, Sewing*

My work emerges from a feminist art tradition, both in painting and in fiber arts. Painting and fiber arts are methodical processes, and the physicality of each grounds me in the work. Despite that sewing is a calming process for me, I am aware of the history of violence attached to sewing; it is women's work, and specifically poor women’s work. It speaks of women who

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sewed clothes for their children because they couldn't afford them, those who worked in dangerous factories, or as seamstresses to support themselves and their loved ones. It resonates with the history of enslaved women sewing family quilts. When I am sewing, I feel connected to my grandma, who sewed clothes for all of her eight children, and her mother, too, who sewed clothes for her ten children. The act of sewing is tied to memory and family, and this is part of why I incorporate it into my artwork. Not only that, but sewing is seen as a passive and introverted act, one of trapped housewives and their daughters. I subvert the traditional associations of sewing by using it as a tool to create bold shapes and playful patterns. Alternatively, I evoke violence through the act of puncturing and suturing fabric or paper, here sewing becomes an act of rebellion and is a tool to voice anger or lust.

In my sculpture _Bedtime!_ (2019) I incorporated plush fabric shapes to create a children's mobile, including craft elements such as buttons, jewels, and string. This piece is an example of using sewing as a way to incorporate play and texture into my work. In my painting, _Never Have I Ever_ (2019), I utilized large messy stitching to reference sutures and connections; in this case sewing acts a tool for drawing, not for construction. Further, the stitching is exaggerated and almost violent in its puncturing of the paper, subverting the traditional calm and precise practice of sewing.

In my paintings, the act of sewing is mirrored through a technique of scratching into the paintings with the back end of the paintbrush. This evokes the pattern of stitching, I scratch across different planes of color, to blend them together, or to uncover what is underneath a layer of paint. I use scratching in many of my paintings, such as _Knuckle Stitches_ (2018), _Trick or Treat_ (2018) and _Erin Wolf DECEASED_ (2018). The act scratching is physical and reminiscent
of long nails, a feminine instrument. The scratching is cathartic and mirrors feminine violence; someone trying to get out of their mind or body and screaming to be heard.

*Never Have I Ever*, 2019

*Knuckle Stitches*, 2018
**Depth, Untangling**

In my paintings I attempt to create a world one can fall into. The purpose of this is to engage the viewer in the work on a large scale, I want them to be enmeshed in the pieces, in order to engage with the work on an emotional and visceral level. I often paint on large surfaces, and create depth by layering paint on the canvas over long periods of time to build up the surface. I allude to space by working in darker tones first and moving towards lighter colors. This technique can be seen in my piece, *I Poured Boiling Water Into the Wind and it Turned to Mist/ I Burned Myself* (2019). I work using lively brushstrokes, curling lines, and splashes and drips of paint. I paint in this intuitive and bodily way to get in touch with my feelings and underlying energies while working. Further, the way I work mirrors the act of uncovering that which one is made to cover up; passions, rage, silliness, grief, lust. I impel a sense of underlying tension or sadness in the pieces in the midst of bright color and expressive strokes.

I have also noticed a pattern of tangling and detangling in my work; intercrossed, twisted and matted lines run throughout many of my pieces. This can be seen in my drawings *Tangle I* (2019), *Tangle II* (2019), and monoprint, *Trick or Treat* (2018). This process of tangling lines is a calming and repetitive process, as well as a way I externally visualize confusion or mess. As I am responding to complex feelings, I work to give the paintings a feeling of something deeper playing along with the bright colors and energetic shapes that I often use.
Inspirations and Themes

**Hysteria, Madness**

My work is also inspired by the concept of female insanity and hysteria in historical literature. Some important influences on my work are *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *To Room 19* by Doris Lessing, both are short stories about women's mental illness.⁹ *The Yellow Wallpaper*, set in the late 17th century, describes a women struggling with what we might classify today as severe anxiety disorder and is prescribed her bed rest by her doctor and husband. She is trapped in small yellow room, and obsesses over the wallpaper, eventually scratching it apart as she crawls around the room to unleash a woman she sees imprisoned in the wallpaper. *To Room 19* charts a similar arc, a housewife whose children are

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growing up feels a sense of purposelessness in her life, and she draws away from her family searching for solitude. Eventually she is overwhelmed by depression and commits suicide.

I connect these texts to my work because the protagonists feel controlled by emotion, and have trouble reconciling that with the world around them. Stories of women's hysteria and madness have always been of interest to me. In these texts the protagonists are commanded by extremes of feeling, which is seen as a weakness, and their inability to cope with the world eventually leads to their descent into madness and death. Their hysteria is viewed as their fault, and not a product of the patriarchal society which they live in. In my work I bring light to these extremes of emotion, as women are still socialized to downplay their feelings and behavior. I engage with dramatized imagery relating to stories of women's hysteria because I feel both compelled and repulsed them. I sympathize with the protagonists, and personally struggle with mental illness and depression. Yet I am drawn to idealized intensity and drama of these stories, and use this as inspiration for my work. For example, in It Was So Sweet (2018), I painted a female figure on all fours, with disproportionately large hands to represent the feeling of losing control. The background is not representational, giving the figure a feeling of being lost in space, and exaggerating a sense helplessness in the piece. Another example is the painting, It's Like Ok (2018), in which I repeat the same words across the page, to represent the idea of obsession and a dialogue with oneself. In these works I draw from texts relating to female hysteria and madness, particularly from the 19th century. Though the colors I use are vivid and lively, there is a more serious side to the pieces. I imbue a feeling of teetering on the edge of something, or a darkness hidden just out of view. In all of my works, there is a balance of both light and dark energies, which is clear in these two works in particular.
Adoration, Adorning

Present within both my sculptural work and paintings is the concept of a collection of objects. I have always collected things, my childhood bedroom is filled with rocks, shells, cards, letters, photos, ceramic figurines, plastic toys, feathers, beads, sea glass, jewelry, pinecones, seedpods, scraps of fabric, coins, and hair clips. I incorporate an array of collected items in many
of my sculptural works, in order to engage with an idea of girlhood. Imagine a dresser covered in
jewelry, makeup, glitter, pins, buttons, shells, papers, and candles. This image brings to mind
childhood; a collection of largely useless and unnecessary items, that together are not only
venerated by whoever own them, but create a beautiful landscape. Children collect and organize
objects according to what they like, it is a way they can understand the world. In my work I
parcel together bits of material femininity, and by doing so engage with tropes of femininity and
childhood. For example, my sculpture "Bedtime!" (2019) is a mobile covered in sparkles and
glitter, with plush shapes and buttons suspended from the bejeweled platform. In my sculpture
"Bathtime!" (2019) I created a sculpture overflowing with brightly colored shapes, wax casts, and
plush ornaments; an homage to a space overflowing with objects. By creating sculptures that are
adorned, I honor and respect the aesthetic of young women and children, and elevate them by
putting them in a gallery space. Not only that, but I also show the darker undertones of
childhood in these works. In "Bathtime!" the viewer observes three lighted candles sitting on the
surface of the chair, which slowly melt down, creating rivets of colored wax flowing and
dripping down the chair. The candles melt and burn the wax shapes around them, as well as the
actual surface of the chair. The potential for the complete destruction of the piece, which is made
totally of flammable materials, creates a hard edge to an otherwise soft and playful work, and
pushes the viewer to reflect on a darker side of girlhood and femininity.
Bathtime! 2019

Close-up of Bathtime! (taken as candles burn)
Middle School Girl

My other inspirations are the media and literature I absorb in my daily life. This includes romantic comedies, sitcoms, young adult novels, lesbian fiction, and classical romance texts. These all feed into my works which often relate to romance, love, and sex. In many of these mediums, there is a set structure, and the conclusion or narrative is clear from the outset. In some of my pieces, I utilize tropes or ideals of romance and love in order to examine the ways in which my expectations of love and the actual outcomes differ. For example, my work integrating words and phrases, such as Never Have I Ever (2019) and It’s Like Ok (2018) are often literal dialogues with myself relating to romantic relationships, and utilize repeating cliqued words and phrases. It’s Like Ok repeats the phrase “it’s like”, which evokes a feeling of helplessness; someone trying to explain something but they cannot. It also engages with the word “like”, which was often used by teens, particularly girls, growing up in the early 2000’s. At the time it was deemed improper, yet is now part of the vernacular of my generation. In using this phrase I am reappropriating this word for the viewer, and formalizing it within the gallery setting, drawing attention to the rejection of language used by teenage girls.

In my work I play off entrenched ideals of romance, and include symbols such as hearts, butterflies, jewels, “xo’s”, halos, flowers, and wings in my pieces. These symbols are reminiscent of the tropes used in young adult novels, fairy tales, and romantic comedies. They are also commonly recognizable as part of the images associated with young girls. My piece entitled Open Up, Sweet Baby! (2019) is a large painting of a dripping pink and red butterfly.

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10 Some of my specific influences are the films, When Harry Met Sally, Bridget Jones Diary, 27 Dresses, The Proposal, Love Actually, The Holiday, and How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days. Sitcoms that influence me are Friends, Frasier, Full House, and How I Met Your Mother. Finally, texts such as Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë, Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen, The Color Purple by Alice Walker, Valencia by Michelle Tea, Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit by Jeannette Winterson, Annie on My Mind by Nancy Garden, and The Miseducation of Cameron Post by Emily M. Danforth all inspire and feed my work.
This painting is both erotic and childlike, reminiscent of the cliqued imagery associated with girlhood. It utilizes the symbols of a butterfly, curlie-cues, and hearts, yet also shows a grittiness; the butterfly is bleeding with dripping red paint. In this piece the viewer engages with girly nostalgia as well as the destruction of an idealistic romance. These pieces engage in dialogue with notions of romance and sex through the eyes of teenage girls, and push against the normative expectations of girlhood.

Conclusion

My large body of work is varied and expansive, but is based in a practice of writing and drawing in a diary. Guided by the philosophy of Giles Delueze and the book *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus, I use painting, sculpture, and drawing to create a world dotted with shapes, twisting lines and bodies, and vivid colors. I explore the ways in which the personal can be political,
through work examining childhood memory, girlhood, abstract emotion, and romance and love. I work to elevate the voices of women and children in my pieces, through a focus on the idealistic imagery relating to girlhood. I also work intuitively on expressive and colorful paintings, connecting to emotion and feeling through repetitive processes. My influences are largely women; artists and writers who work from personal experience and identity, and push against normative expectations of women. My art is sometimes over the top and colorful, sometimes subdued and dark. At times my work can be melancholy, dramatic, joyful, dark, or anything else I feel. Working from my heart is not always easy, but I do not doubt myself. My work is honest and true, I create what I know and what I struggle to know!
Bibliography


