

**Twisting in Honey and Swallowing Dust**

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FOR THE DEGREE

OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

BY

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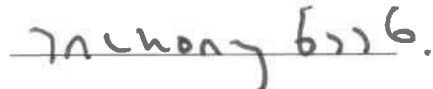
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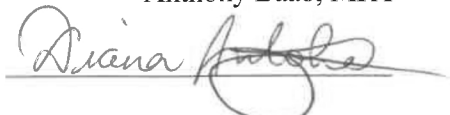
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## *Acknowledgements*

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*twisting in honey and swallowing dust*



Fig. 1, Installation shot of *twisting in honey and swallowing dust*

Myth and storytelling follow a framework that gives guidelines for moral consciousness when main characters are at crossroads. My artistic practice employs these structures to counteract feelings of internal conflict that have no direct answers or resolution. The world-building I explore is centered around spaces of mental uncertainty by using drawn narrative, installation, and sculptural relationships. In my work, I compose complex encounters of fear, love, and hope to suggest the arduous emotional states we wade through to eventually find the comfort of growth. Through visual tension, I highlight how complicated emotions of doubt have been a part of self-discovery

throughout time. This visual tension is made palpable in *twisting in honey and swallowing dust*, wherein the dualities of apprehension foster spaces in which inward and outward looking occur simultaneously.

Western myth typically centers flawed characters undertaking quests for love, achievement, or fulfillment while enduring fear, pain, and loss. These quests are traditionally motivated by and situated within patriarchal value systems. Though myth can challenge existing social conditions, they often reify archetypal and stereotypical solutions for internal conflict, neglecting the nuance of complicated emotion or ambivalence in favor of succinctness, clarity, or triumphalism as championed within patriarchy. In myth, “we begin to see that our personal difficulties, struggles and inadequacies are woven into a context of shared human condition that is radically flawed” (Kolbenschlag). Myths directly or obliquely feature issues within current social structures, while connecting parts of the populace through underscoring shared tribulations.

For example, fairy tales often center around how marriage will help a woman gain security. Ancient epics pose that hard work will produce success and power. These anecdotes might have an adequate place in certain social fabrics, but I’m interested in exploring how and where we find answers that are rooted to the nuance of life experiences; the moments when there is a disparity between meeting expectations in uncontrollable life events, or when we realize we have to shift our beliefs and value systems in the face of failure.

The atmospheres within my drawn and sculpted narratives are internal landscapes, where paths untaken create larger, nebulous anxieties. Visual tensions present feelings of

anxiety in my work. Viewers encounter hints of suspense and ambiguity in figures gesturing restraint and comfort, objects that might be weapons or adornments, scenes that are both organized and tangled, and whispers of warning within object and symbol interactions (Fig. 2). These myriad interactions have undertones of trepidation as my meandering thoughts sneak their way into the details, using moments from personal experiences as precedents to set up the scenes. Junctures that gave me pause, made me tense, or carried contentment intuitively find their way into my work.



Fig. 2, graphite on paper, 58" x 48"

Though the narrative vignettes are chosen intuitively, they all have relationships that relate to my own lived, femme experience. Seen within the twisting figures are expressions of femininity: corsets, ribbons, beauty accessories, and undergarments complete with ruffles and ribbons. Incorporating these elements into my work is a reflection of negotiating my own relationship with my identity. I view beauty rituals as sources of private gratification, while preoccupation with appearance makes me an active participant in upholding oppressive constraints. Dressing for notions of the male gaze, purchasing somewhat costly beauty products, enacting beauty norms that champion youth; implications of these practices “reinforce structures of domination such as racism, classism, ableism, and homophobia” (Davis). The myriad expressions of femininity in my work are embodied by binding objects, constricting figurative gestures, and adornment paraphernalia with spiny appendages; a tensility aptly encapsulated within the piercing contours of jewelry-like pewter objects planted throughout the installation (Fig. 7). Fusing these elements generates a narrative stress that reflects the ambivalence women have about choices, or lack thereof, to participate in societal standards of idealized appearance.

Subjection to these constraints has been reflected in myth and fairy tales. Psyche in Greek mythology was so beautiful that she was punished by Aphrodite, surviving by submitting to the goddess’s power and subsequently earning the heart of Eros. Ariel in Hans Christian Andersen’s *Little Mermaid* must change her appearance and identity to capture the heart of her lover. In both of these stories the female main character ultimately prevails, but only after undergoing suffering for the love of a man. Historically, stories of women’s experience have been formed or reiterated by men which ultimately



produce messaging that highlights patriarchal initiatives. My work expresses the untold narratives implicit in fated decisions.



Fig. 3, Leonora Carrington, *And Then We Saw the Daughter of the Minotaur*, 1953

There are inherent connections between my work and women who work with the visual lexicon of the subconscious. Leonora Carrington's approach to developing narratives feels akin to my way of working. Carrington built personal systems of symbols; disregarding Surrealist era approaches to meaning-making that relied on inferior characterizations of women and reduced female sexuality to the object of men's desires (Watz). Inspired by alchemy, the mystery of natural forces, and magical realism, she developed works with dream-like settings that related to her experiences as a woman (Fig. 3). Carrington used myth and folklore to develop her characters and their interactions with the surrounding scenery. My practice uses the discourse of myth and

ritual seen in the cryptic objects I incorporate (Fig. 4). Ties to esoterica furthers an essence of obscurity, and alludes to the intimate habits of beauty, sexuality, mental health, domesticity, and memory-making that women cyclically form their lives around.

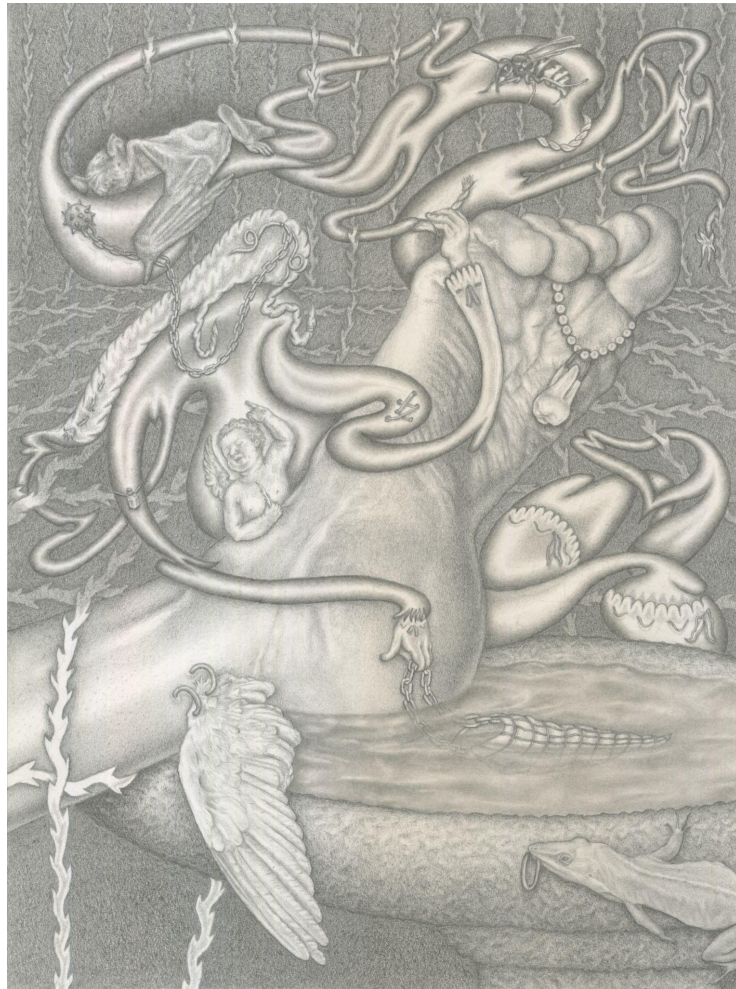


Fig. 4, graphite on paper, 11" x 14"

A series of cement relief castings are featured in my exhibition *twisting in honey and swallowing dust*. Their hand-hewn nature hints at wall tablets seen in ancient tombs and temples; art that has been carved into stone, plaster, and wood that often portrays narratives about myths and belief systems (Fig. 5). The painted details on each replica

vary. While the same painted shapes repeat throughout the series, they combine in distinctive ways for each casted piece. Low-lit and illuminated only by a hot pink light, their dimensional shadows become less of the focus as their legibility is centered around the marked, stark black shapes.



Fig. 5, installation shot of cement relief pieces

Interpreting these details as a whole suggests a system of symbols, bringing about references to the life and death cycles or stories of gods seen in ancient hieroglyphs. The visual reference to archaic systems of communication in these age-old tableaus implies that there is an ethic encoded in my pieces. As tinted ribbons, wine glasses, spiny objects, patterns and flowers join in an amalgam of compositions, the viewer will keep searching to interpret their overarching message without an obvious key to dissect their collective meaning. The instinct to look for a relationship between them parallels the catalyst for making this series. It mirrors my internal search for an idealized version of myself, one that can fit all of the paradoxical parts of my inner self: a staunchly independent woman

who carries fears of future loneliness; a reliable caregiver who forgets to check in with loved ones. These conflicts cause anxiety while allowing for self-reflection, enabling me to work towards goals that give me satisfaction within the present moment.

The allusion to this internal excavation is most aptly seen in the black sand installation centered in the room (Fig. 6). The fringed edges of the square shape bring about a reference to a rug, while the material of granular sand, reflecting the pink room's red light, feels akin to a quarry. A broken casted relief piece of the same series lies in the center, perimetered by a hand-mottled and low-lying fence. The combination of materials and structures evokes a grave, one where the headstone has been broken and forgotten in an earthen mass. Both excavation and grave site, the combination is a motif of excavating the internal self. Putting to rest paths untaken, mourning lost relationships, while cyclically digging up reasons for the choices and uncontrollable events that ultimately inform who we are at our core.



Fig. 6, Installation shot of back room

Illuminated by a sultry magenta glow, this room contains an experiential seduction. The artificial light skews the references to ancient tableaus inherent in the relief pieces by the gleam of night club lighting, the glare of an alarm system, or the erotic mood of a bedroom. These are all experiences of inflammable emotion—impassioned moments where apprehension is felt through loss of control. The dominant narrative strays from messages of power and control typical in ancient myths or stories of androcentric societies that emphasize women’s subservience. The mercurial nature of this space features the internal force of ambiguous feelings, where momentary perception is begotten through reactive processes instead of those that are clearly defined.

A suspenseful discovery can be found upon exiting the room. Resting on a dim wall is an elongated kitchen match propped up by a small, spur-shaped piece of hardware (Fig. 7). Below is a trail of black sand that leads into the main space. Irregular edges curl outside of its thin mass, referencing a line of gunpowder as it meanders into the next room. The playful exaggeration of these elements is undermined by the possibility of viewer interaction—one where additional tensivity is introduced through the enactment of secretive ignition.

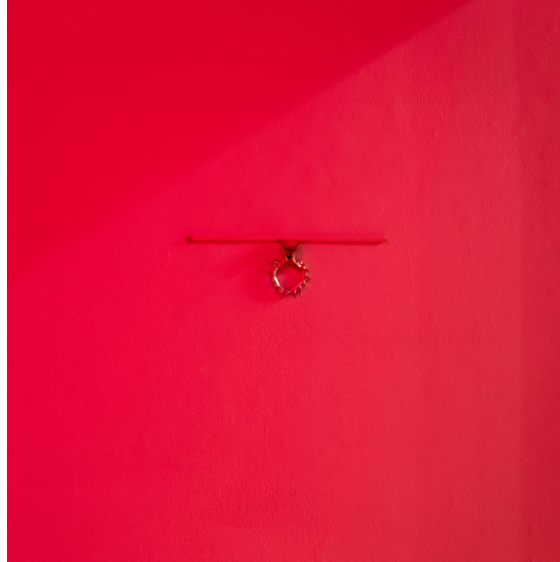


Fig. 7

The proposed performance is a seduction that introduces Camp into the exhibition. The non-combustible sand performs the notion of gunpowder, while the sand's elemental materiality renders the menacing match innocuous. Its artifice alludes to the truth of the human condition, where a valid viewer response to possibly ignite is revealed but not allowed through the absence of a lighting strip and usage of fire-resistant sand (Sontag). This duality imparts a parody of fear because it offers no actual conflict. It's a nod to the fact that no one can actually disrupt the modes of internal conflict referenced within my work because they are a closed-circuit, interior process. At most, the viewer is offered accidental control over the space through interaction with the sand: smearing the mounds of its crisp edges through distracted meandering. In my personal experience during the installation, the sand was the least controllable element throughout a tightly-considered curation. The sand echoes the daily, unmanageable experiences that affect temporal mental states.



Fig. 8, Installation shot of sand leading into the gallery's front room

Ephemeral in its nature, black sand becomes the exhibition's most unmediated element (Fig. 8, 12, 15). It morphs into rugs, suggests gunpowder, graphite, alludes to the growth that takes place in garden soil, or is expressive of gestural actions. The material's mutability allows for the creation of vignетted atmospheres that give the surrounding work further context for narrative. As it trails into the gallery's front room, it mirrors the twisting shapes in the arrangement of sculpted and drawn motifs. The sand's contours intermittently reference acts of clawing or scraping, activating my hand's physical relationship to the making of the work thus presenting the emotionality of my authorship.

Both contained and loose, sand vacillates between different systems of control and entropy that echoes internal mental states seen throughout this body of work.

The back room is an abridged version of the themes seen in the exhibition's other pieces. The painted reliefs clue the viewer in on the act of seeking answers while the grave hints at mining pain and loss. Acting as a spatial beacon, the magenta light emanates the framework of fraught feminine interiority that is carried throughout the installation. In the gallery's front room, intricately-layered motifs of tension are embedded within an array of maximalist reliefs and drawings. Myriad implications of apprehension are aptly featured within a life-sized graphite rendering that's centered within the room. Nine months of roaming reflections became intrinsically wrought within its composition, molding it into the piece that anchored the themes in subsequent work.

Painted on the wall are hot pink flames that symmetrically frame the centered drawing. The stenciled motif straddles a line of order and disarray; the fire's licking edges are unruly while its spatial placement and contained mass presents balance (Fig. 1). The color of the flames is reminiscent of my teenage bedroom walls, a time when the innocence of childhood is exchanged for the discovery of sexuality. This shifting period is monumental for forming internalized frameworks of social positioning and identity. The playful color and illustrative shape offers a Campy cheekiness that alludes to the impassioned frameworks of mercurial moods. It surrounds the drawing to give an overt clue towards the thematic undertones of this elaborately detailed piece, one that requires a slower investigation.



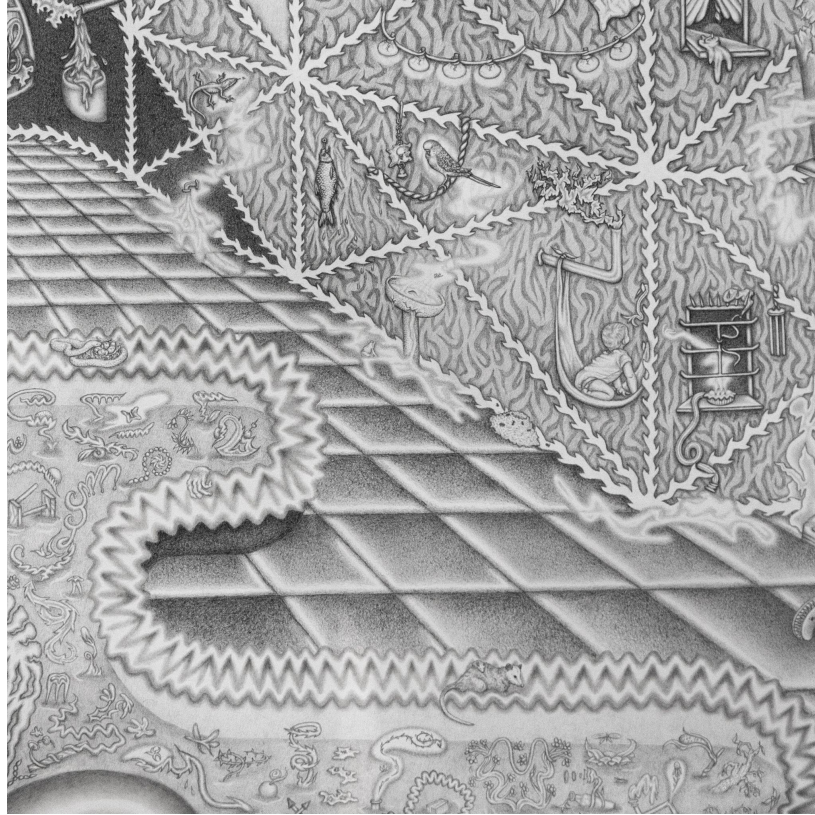


Fig. 9, detail shot of large drawing

Realistic objects, animals, and figures intuitively rendered into my drawings are indirect recollections that border on nuanced moments of pain and care. These memories span a range of my lifetime; a hazy childhood memory of my grandmother cleaning my thorn scrapes after falling into her groomed rosebush, decades of watching my dad maintain the backyard in the Louisiana heat, hugging my mom in the garden after my brother's mental illness diagnosis. I memorialize relics of sentiment by plucking impressions and scattering them into narratives, forming my private archive. In the lush dregs of summer, the drenched smell of spring, outdoor memories strongly root in my psyche; the intensity of these moments harmonic with restless Southern seasons.

A yard is a space that is both private and exposed. The motif runs throughout my work because of its connection to suburban environments. In my drawings there are compositional elements that are emblematic of the suburban yard's architectural structure (Fig. 9). Formal, organized visual elements such as tiled flooring, columns, and gardens come together to imbue the work with innuendos of suburbia. The suburbs are spaces that idealize domestic bliss, while their visual indication in artwork finds ways to represent the psychodynamics, the layers and edges, of what lies underneath and around it all (Freudenheim). With a suburban childhood upbringing, alluding to these spaces in my work introduces a tension between the myth of placid paradise brought about by economic mobility and the pressure for conformity that hides the nuances of family psychodrama. The tight compositions in my work allude to generalized organization of these exterior utopian settings, while I break up this uniformity by incorporating visual elements emblematic of a disorder within the controlled structure. Objects of detritus and disarray like trash in a manicured garden, smoke that escapes from windows, and domestic creatures creep into the scenery to interrupt the panorama of normalcy. I implement out-of-place imagery to upend the homogeneity and irregularities creating a semblance of something being amiss. Through this, I refer to the disruption of the composed family dynamic within privileged upbringings, or how the artifice of normalcy is broken by experiences of emotional disappointment within traditional systems of domesticity and caregiving relationships.

Using graphite as a medium creates scenes devoid of color, attracting equal attention to all areas and forms of the image while the darkest values act as compositional anchors. The cool grays made by graphite could emotively imply an exanimate setting,

joyless and bleak. This affective undertone counteracts the energetic, illustrative style of the setting and figures, rendering the visceral reading of the piece fully reliant on moments within the narrative. If colors can alert, soothe, attract, disgust, differentiate, I propose how shapes, objects, and gestures can do this devoid of expressive color. Using grayscale with detailed scenery reminds me of trying to dissect a complex feeling, when reasoning isn't obvious and internal explanation requires following cyclical trails of reflection.

The relationship between Southern womanhood and the symbols of the Southern gothic— transgressive characters, the grotesque, the supernatural, decay or isolation— manifest in my work through warped feminine bodies (Fig. 10). The ideal of ‘Southern daintiness’ offers a template for femininity that women cannot realistically map themselves onto. In my work, the absence of realistic feminine bodies creates a subversion from masculine ideologies. The blemished and misshapen archetypal bodies are responses to the social expectations of femininity being in conflict with the lived embodiment of a woman’s experience. Their fragmented bodies curvaceously contort, reflecting an impasse between the “whole” self that Southern culture demands of women and the chaotic experience of fitting into roles of caretaking, mothering, and refinement (Miller).



Fig. 10, detail shot of large drawing

When incorporating the figure into my work, I'm drawn to how expressive bodies can communicate a range of extreme emotions. Bodies that stretch, twist, hug, or pull might simply spark visual curiosity through their relationship to childhood memories (i.e., a cartoon, comic, illustration, or a more generalized feeling that illustrative bodies have connections to adolescence). Cartoon narratives typically have a perception of ensuing disaster that the characters have to navigate around. This can be seen in the Betty Boop *Ding Dong Doggie* episode. Betty Boop wants her small, squirrely dog to remain within her home. The dog inevitably sneaks out to help extinguish a home on fire. The dog runs back home after the animated flames chase around and batter the dog, disciplined by Betty Boop for escaping. A moral about disobeying the rules is encoded

into this story, cultivated to persuade children to listen to their parents. I'm interested in how myths are propagated through these childhood television shows. From a young age, fantastical spaces plant seeds about power structures in the home, battling antagonistic foes, care and friendship.

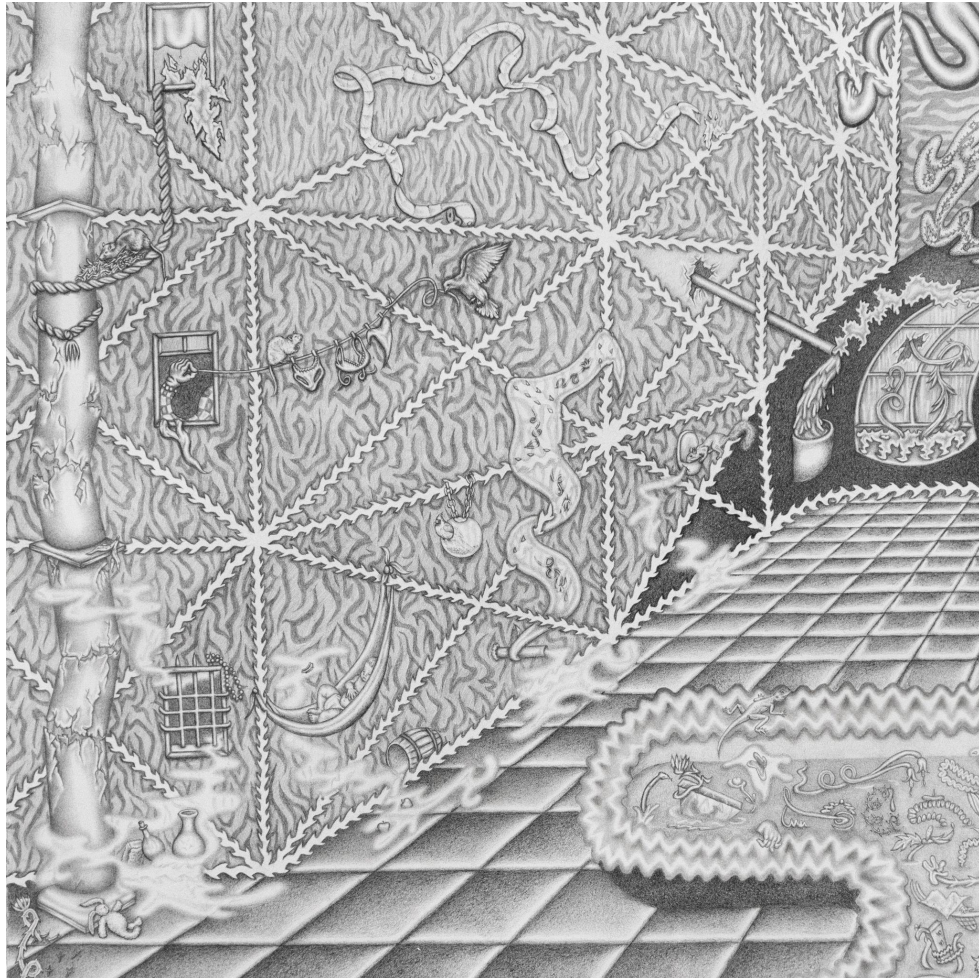


Fig. 11, detail shot of large drawing

Hints of domestic objects and environments are scattered throughout my work: cats and dogs, overgrown gardens with yard ornaments, windows with a pie sitting on the sills. A baby—a proxy for comfort and maternal instinct—hangs off of a steaming pipe to

elicit concerns for protection and accident (Fig. 11). Incorporating the idea of the dwelling into my practices builds a narrative around the home as a space where multiplicities of tension reside. It's a space that historically is linked to womanhood, since sexism delegates the maintenance of the homeplace as a feminine responsibility (hooks). Whether within the domestic space or within familial relationships, the duality of caretaking contains the pride of building comfort and security, and the weight of burden to the obligation of daily routines. The domestic space reflects contradictions without a way to resolve them. In my work, tension is used to address that the comfort of the home is interrupted by women's complicated relationships to domestic and familial caregiving responsibilities.

Other hints of the dwelling occur within the exhibition's object installation. A white key sits on top of a small rug-shaped sand mass next to the gallery's entrance (Fig. 12). It brings about references to a doormat, where a key to access the home is in plain sight instead of hidden. This setup proposes an easy passageway, but no entrance is actually offered without a door or keyhole within the space. A viewer is prompted to question what parts of this domain they are unable to access. The object arrangement hints at my process of obscuring distinguishing details of my private life within my work, allowing me to continue using time with my practice as an opaque and protected space for self-reflection. I combine narrative elements to maintain ambiguity, suggesting thematic relationships about love, fear, and desire but avoiding an overarching narrative that would portray the inner depths of my personal life.



Fig. 12, Installation shot in front gallery room

As I intuitively compose details, the mystery of their combination creates a veiled understanding of tool, ritual, or the treasured. Coded objects and impending events can be perceived in my narratives, such as repeating cherubs and rats that stand in for interventions of guidance characters—a narrative device employed in myths when animals or beings act as emissaries of help or propagators of sabotage (Fig. 13). With a visual practice that centers around internal journeys, I rely on the aesthetic of fantasy to inspire my world-building. The materials chosen, methods of creation, final display, and a reference to the mysterious, ancient, or other-worldly are decisions that lure the viewer into acts of discovery.



Fig. 13, large relief in gallery's front room



There are suggestions of comfort, fear, and desire within a notably non-existent overarching narrative as the viewer attempts to piece together the symbols to create a story. Through this, the exhibition offers stop-and-go moments, similar to how we read chapters in a book. It is the cumulative linkage between these moments that offers context for the larger theme of tension within the work, creating spaces for inquisition of meaning, nostalgic reflection, and playful meandering. The viewer's perseverance in seeking answers can speak to how internal states of apprehension (of not knowing) is an unerring part of the human condition.

Myths and fairy tales can be quarried for the human truths they may reveal, often relaying scenes of cruelty that give warnings about not attending to people's inner worlds (Waldman). These warnings are habitually formed around misogynist messaging seen within the countless examples that characterize women as antagonists. This is acutely reflected in the central themes of Charles Perrault's *The Tales of Mother Goose*; a seventeenth century written collection that was based on Western oral story-telling traditions. The retelling of these stories pervades modern culture through countless children's books and film adaptations, ingraining principles of feminine virtuosity from childhood. The spiteful stepmother in *Cinderella*, the seductive sorceress in *Sleeping Beauty*, the dangerous witch in *Little Red Riding Hood* are all stories that indicate women are meant to be defeated when they deviate from the moral traditions of Eurocentric, colonial patriarchy. As Western patriarchy controls the narratives that are disseminated through culture, stories told in adolescence that uplift the power of whiteness and men become dangerous. They ingrain a positionality of subservience within marginalized

groups, including women, by creating a message that punishment is due when straying from patriarchal expectations.



Fig. 14, small relief in front room of gallery

By using the visual language of myth and fairy tales, I propose that self-understanding developed in childhood is susceptible to the messages ingrained within these modes of storytelling. The references to adolescence can be seen in the subject matter and muted pastel color palette of the relief pieces in the gallery's front room. On a beveled wall across from the gallery's entrance hangs a small relief with curling ornamental appendages that extend from the frame (Fig. 14). The florid form insinuates a setting for this piece, offering it as an object that might be hanging in a child's bedroom. Its center features a lamb that is constricted by twining shapes, an allegory for innocence being bound and hampered. Soft undertones of femininity are revealed through the color palette and the lamb's symbolic association to gentleness,

meekness, and purity. The girlish whimsy it evokes is subverted by the binding trimmings and a black weapon-like object that hangs off of the bottom of the piece. With fantasy-like leanings, this piece decentralizes storytelling's negative underpinnings seen within female antagonists by alternatively introducing feminine tension as a formative principle.



Fig. 15, installation shot of front room

*twisting in honey and swallowing dust* is an homage to my own upbringing. On a personal scale, this body of work acknowledges the different caregiving roles women in my family, including myself, have and continue to undertake. It also honors the privilege of being nurtured by a family that held space for conversations about internal reflection

from a young age, propelling me to this current moment when I have been offered an opportunity to visually share these complexities. I walked my grandmother through this body of work while she was shifting into a different chapter of life; her caregiving responsibilities newly altered after my grandfather's recent passing. We discussed the time it took to render these pieces while she admired details within sweet, charming scenes. While we tearfully hugged she told me my grandfather would be proud; a twinkling minute saturated with my grandfather's sentiments about pursuing endeavors with passion, their love for me, and her admiration of my creative growth. I hoped that the thematic underpinnings of feminine strength during times of duress would quietly remain with her as I talked about my work, avoiding overt explanations that would detract from her enjoyment and the needed celebratory tone while we concertedly mourn. My drive for making art is encapsulated in these moments, when I can expose parts of my inner world to create further connections with those that I love.

Showing artwork creates a setting that can break down conversational barriers by requiring inward and outward vulnerability for an artist, the viewer, and the conversing audience. Though this body of work has layers of meaning to dissect, I offer the outermost mantle as a potential stopping point. The playful, sweet, and Campy moments provide portals for simple visual enjoyment, where momentarily escapism can occur through the delight of discovery. Those that walk down paths of deeper inquiry will unearth conflicts surrounding femininity and interiority. Buried and exposed throughout these pieces are cyclical processes of loss, the limbo of emotional uncertainty, the power of imagining the better, and the progress that happens when we internally and externally challenge. A ubiquitous, age-old attraction to storytelling prompts a revelation of these

themes. I illuminate the mercurial by attracting with “honey”, a term of sweet southern endearment, and loosening the “dust”, a symbol of endings and beginnings.



Fig. 16, Installation shot of twisting in honey and swallowing dust

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