

THE
UPSTAIRS
ROOM

Michaelis School of Fine Art

The Upstairs Room

Shahir Singh

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Artist Statement

A gun drawn from a handbag, in an empty parking lot. A menacing figure approaching. The kitchen scissors in my hand. Long strands of hair, now limp on the bathroom tiles. Mould spreading. Silence.

On a sunny morning I decided to take a walk to the supermarket. As I walked through a deserted parking area, a woman approached me. She introduced herself and requested money. I explained that I had no cash on me and asked her to stop following. She proceeded to draw a gun from her handbag and threaten me. The police were dismissive about the mugging upon finding out that the assailant was a transgender woman. This experience left me feeling discouraged from relying on the authorities. Shortly after the mugging, I was stalked on multiple occasions in a shopping mall. The stalker was an older man who would wait till I was alone and make comments about his attraction to me. Remembering my previous interaction with the police, I felt that reporting him to the security would be pointless. I found myself developing an anxiety towards leaving my apartment.

Following the series of traumatic events, I did not leave my living space for two weeks. I repeated a cycle of staying in bed, staring in silence at a ceiling that had started to grow mould. I was convinced that my appearance led to the events that played out, and cutting off all my hair would result in never having to experience what had happened again. After my hair was no longer a part of me, a looming feeling of loss and discomfort followed shortly after. The hair had made its presence in the space known. Even after sweeping it up and containing it in a plastic bag, traces of the hair remained throughout. I was unable to get rid of it. As I lay in bed it poked my skin through my clothing. I was unable to forget about it. Reality started to blur as distorted figures began occupying the corners of this space. I felt both my mental health and living space deteriorating.

I thought that if I allowed myself to ignore and mask what happened, I would be able to move on. However, I felt my conscience being haunted instead. My work decides to revisit what I once refused to confront by making use of the memories available to me. I take control of my experience with the authorities, by using police identikit drawing methods to visually reconstruct the memory of my perpetrators. These are displayed amongst the memories of being confined to my apartment, which tend to manifest as both disturbing and disorganised. To piece these memories together, I desperately and repetitively document them through a variety of mediums, connecting them to each other and myself.

Through combining these various methods of making that I have used to process my trauma, I have created a space that allows for the navigation of my mental landscape.





Processing Trauma Through Art

“In all its forms art represents the mind of its creator” (Talwar, 2007: 25).

My initial concept avoided acknowledging the detrimental events that took place last year, instead I was solely focused on the aftermath of what they had caused. I recalled a depressive episode where I remained confined to my apartment for a period of two weeks. During this time, I did not leave my bed and watched as the space around me had begun to rapidly deteriorate. My goal was to revisit and reconstruct this personal space. However, as my work began to progress, I had the realization that it was impossible to explore this space to its fullest without acknowledging the experiences that had contributed to it.

At first, talking through the causes of my trauma was something that I found challenging. As someone who struggles with verbally expressing himself, I felt extremely vulnerable communicating experiences that I had repressed for over a year. These experiences which I had intentionally tried to forget, began coming back to me in segments, in a non-linear fashion that I had to make sense of. I began to recall the pain of cutting off all my hair, mould spreading across my ceiling, rotting fruit in the refrigerator, cracks in the walls and ghostly apparitions. This imagery had become important symbolism in my work and acted as the first step in accessing my trauma.

My first instinct was to rapidly begin documenting the imagery before it had the chance to escape my memory. I made use of an inexpensive drawing journal and a variety of oil pastels that I readily had on hand. Starting this process of recording had enabled me to express and confront certain areas of my traumatic experience, that I would not have immediately been able to articulate with words. As a result, a collection of

horrific yet childlike pastel drawings began to fill up the journal. I then began tearing out these pages and sticking them up on the studio walls. To my surprise, the separate images began to form connections and exist in conversation with one another depending on their placement. As the collection grew bigger, the walls began to take on the role of a conspiracy board. This enabled me to attach certain associations to the drawings, allowing for me to investigate and access the events that had led up to my depressive episode. Through repeatedly drawing the imagery that I had associated with my trauma; I began to feel less discomfort discussing and recalling what had happened.



After carefully observing the events that took place, I have deduced that the catalyst that had led up to my breakdown was being held at gunpoint. On a sunny morning I decided to take a walk to the supermarket. As I walked through a deserted parking area, a woman approached me. She introduced herself and requested money. I explained that I had no cash on me and asked her to stop following. She then proceeded to draw a gun from her handbag and threaten me. In the moment I remained completely calm, as I had not fully registered the situation. The woman realised that I had nothing of value on me and reverted to conversation. She then said something that haunted me for months to come: "I like your darkness". She reiterated that what she meant by that statement was that she liked my long dark hair and sense of style. I decided to immediately contact my mother when I reached home after the incident. To my surprise, she blamed my unconservative fashion and long hair for bringing attention to myself. I hadn't even mentioned what the woman had said to me, so I was left believing that there was truth in my mother's observation. I had made myself an easy target. Following the interaction with my parent, the police were dismissive about the mugging upon finding out that the assailant was a transgender woman. The experience left me feeling discouraged from relying on the authorities or anyone else.

The words "I like your darkness" kept replaying in my head. Feelings of isolation, anxiety and paranoia had taken hold of me. This contributed to a sense of agoraphobia, due to the fear seeing the woman again if I left my apartment or even looked outside my window. I was startled by the slightest of noises and began to experience hallucinations and a lack of sleep. However, after a while I had to confront my fears and continue with my daily activities. I decided to stop shopping at the supermarket I frequented, due to the incident. This decision had resulted in another traumatic experience. After I started to shop for groceries in the safety of a shopping mall, I noticed that I was being followed. I chose to ignore the thought, assuming that I was just being paranoid because of the last incident. Though, it became increasingly obvious that I was being stalked. I recall passing the mall security but hesitating to say anything after my previous experience with authority figures. Eventually, the stalker started approaching me. He was an older man who would wait till I was alone and make unsolicited comments about his attraction to me.

Portraying the incident to my mother, resulted in the same outcome as when I mentioned being held at gunpoint. My appearance and long hair were the problem. Due to my difficulty with articulating myself, my hair and fashion were important factors in relation to my identity and self-expression. I began impulsively cutting away at my hair with a kitchen scissors, until it could no longer be cut. This was the last moment that I could recall before my two-week depressive episode. After this period, I had tried my best to mask my experiences, attempting to ignore and forget what had happened, in the hopes of being able to move on. I felt my conscience being haunted instead. I would imagine the faces of my perpetrators amongst unrelated people with similar features. Experiencing brief panic attacks before leaving my apartment had also become common. As time passed, I felt intense and overpowering emotions if I intentionally or accidentally recalled these memories. However, through my process of art making, I began to create a space that allowed for me to safely process my memories and emotions.





I started to include pastel drawings of my perpetrators faces as well as drawings of my interactions with them. This happened to be an unnerving experience at first, although through the repetition of drawing these faces and scenarios I began to feel better. Once the pastel drawings had become easier to confront, I had decided to further investigate the perpetrators identities. In doing so, I took on the role of the authority I was refused. I started this process by using police identikit drawing methods to visually reconstruct the memory of my perpetrators. This process consisted of documenting the features of the assailant that stood out and then referring to a wide reference of model templates and selecting which features best matched the memory of these individuals. Once I was satisfied with the sketch, I added it to the wall of pastel drawings. I started to repeat this process and place the police identikit drawings amongst each other. Surprisingly the drawings displayed a range of similarities, despite using a variety of references. I am aware that these sketches are more likely to not serve as accurate depictions of the assailants. They are merely an attempt to piece together recollections of what these individuals look like in my mind, making the memory of them easier to access. Later, I started to include pastel drawings of myself, as well as constructing police identikit drawings of my own face. These self-portraits allowed for the possibility of creating new conversations between the rest of my drawings. As well as allowing for me to further access repressed memories where I may have initially attempted to remove myself.

“For many people, hair is an attribute that expresses individuality and is central to feelings of attractiveness or unattractiveness. Its unique in the sense that is readily malleable in altering one’s physical appearance” (Cash, 2001:161). Drawing back on the experience of cutting off my hair, a looming feeling of loss and discomfort followed shortly after. The hair had made its presence known. Even after sweeping it up and containing it in the plastic bag, traces of the hair remained throughout my apartment. I was unable to get rid of it. As I lay in bed it poked my skin through my clothing and I was unable to forget about it. The very first object that appeared amongst my drawings was the plastic bag filled with the hair that I had cut off. The presence of the hair in the space, immediately invoked a strong sense of discomfort. I then began to bring in other objects reminiscent of my living space during my depressive episode. These objects consisted of bedroom furniture, white sheeting, rotting fruit, synthetic hair, and a fumigation fogger. Each of these speak to specific themes of my experience such as memory, masking, decay, loss, and unwanted/ unseen presence.

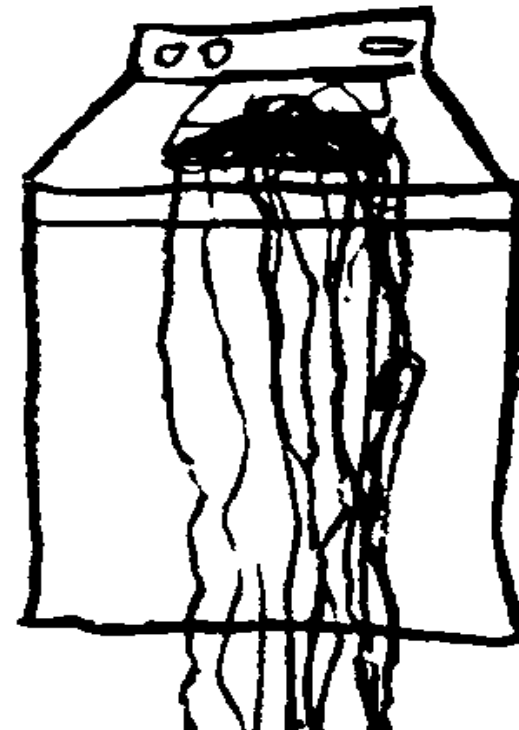




To ignore my trauma, I found myself consuming a large amount of cinema. I decided to bring this coping method into my practice. However, this time I would be using the movies to help narrate my experience. I began creating a series of video collage artworks, featuring the use of subtitles and animations of my pastel drawings. I limited myself to only using copyright free media, available to the public domain. This refers to the idea of working with what I have readily available. The use of the public domain resulted in the black and white appearances of my videos, due to many public domain movies being made before 1964. Unintentionally my videos primarily featured clips taken from horror movies, I believe that this occurred as the clips from that genre best resonated with my experience. I also made use of clips from old documentaries, propaganda, and adverts. The drawings make a reappearance amongst the video clips, animated with the technique of photographing them as they were created. This resulted in a flow between the animations and movie clips. The videos feature no sound, which is evocative of me not speaking for the two-week period that I was confined to my apartment. Instead of sound I have utilised subtitles in two of the videos, to narrate my experience. The subtitles combined with the strange imagery of the movies and animations, creates a juxtaposition which manages to explicitly communicate my experiences without the use of spoken word.



The final component of my work features a sound piece, which was created by recording and combining sounds that I had experienced while lying in bed after the breakdown. The sounds consist of the clanging of washing machines from the laundry room down the corridor and the buzzing of electric appliances around me. The sounds of appliances slowly turn into incomprehensible human whispers, speaking to my experience of hallucinations and paranoia. The sound piece plays softly in the space where my work is displayed, acting as an ambient that situates the space directly back to my apartment. Through combining the various methods of making that I used to process my trauma, I have created an immersive space that allows for the viewer to experience and navigate my mental landscape.









References

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