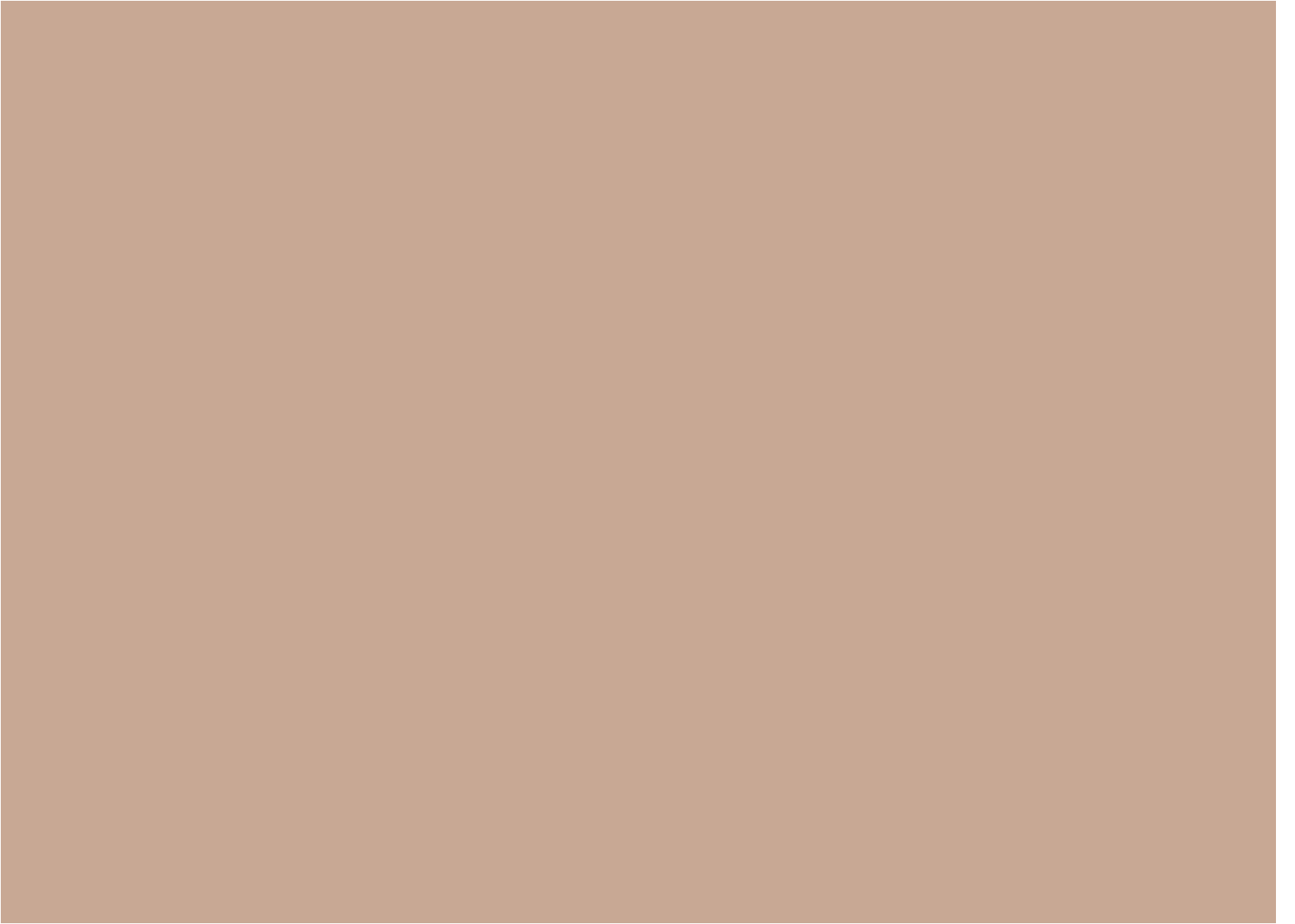


Knit me whole again

Robyn-Tayla

"Unless you have experienced it, it is difficult to comprehend. How can you exist in a space where you are supposed to feel safe, yet you are constantly terrified. How can you tell someone when the abuser is someone so well liked and charming. He is a father, he would never hurt his family. You are stuck. As a child you slowly learn that your friends dad's don't treat them the way yours does. They are kind and patient. They do not threaten and hurt their children. But then why is it different for you? Surely if it was wrong then it wouldn't be happening. How can such a young child wrap their little mind around that. As the years pass, you slowly learn that this behaviour is not normal and you begin to understand just how wrong it is. But with that understanding, the feeling of entrapment and a deeper fear arises. You become angry. How is it that no one else sees it? Why is no one helping you? You are the child, surely you are not meant to protect yourself from danger in your own home. There is no way out. If you were to tell someone you know they would not believe you or they would downplay your experiences. You would be shamed because to the world, he is a good person. Or worse, he would find out and you, or someone you care about, would pay for it. So do you endure it? Soon you will be 18 and you can leave. But then what about those left behind? Those who have experienced that same fear but can't leave. How do you leave them? How could you possibly leave someone in a space where you know first hand how dangerous it is. Domestic violence sticks with you throughout your life. Yes, you may one day be able to leave, but there will always be something or someone connecting you to the source of that violence. And that is why it is so difficult for people to comprehend. Why don't you just leave? The most commonly asked question. Even if you do, you will always be tied to it. This is why it is so dangerous, so toxic. You are related to them. Even though they hurt you, on some level you still love them. Which sickens you but you can't help it. I don't think anyone who has not experienced it will ever understand just how complicated it is. It is not something you can just leave behind. That would mean leaving your whole life and everyone you love, which you won't do. What are you supposed to do?"



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Introduction

For my fourth-year body of work I wanted to explore and address themes of violence within the domestic space. My work is inherently process-based and inspired by lived experiences. Therefore, each piece that I have made has come from a place of pain but most importantly healing. As it was influenced by lived experiences, whilst I was working, I didn't require outside research to assist me in the development of my project. However, research on violence in the domestic space is quite contradictory and for such reason I shall draw information from three texts in order to form a comprehensive stance on the subject matter which is informed by my own experiences. Texts in discussion are: Service responses to the co-victimisation of mother and child: Missed opportunities in the prevention of domestic violence: Experiences from South Africa by Fairouz Nagia-Luddy and Shanaaz Mathews (2011). Nagia-Luddy and Mathews explore themes of how domestic violence is gendered in nature and how it not only affects the mother victim, but also her children. And: Understanding Domestic Violence by Anne L. Ganley (1994). Ganley addresses the definitions of domestic violence and the lack of clarity in these classifications. As well as providing an in-depth discussion on the effects of domestic violence on the victims. And: Legislative response to family violence in South Africa: A family centered perspective by Jill Ryan, Michelle V. Esau and Nicolette V. Roman (2018). This text discusses the legalities of the prosecution of family violence and the challenges said categories pose.

Violence within the Domestic Space

Violence within the domestic space, which will be referred to as "family violence", is a raging epidemic in South Africa, says Ryan, Esau and Roman, in addition it's one of the highest incident rates of violence in South Africa (Ryan, Esau & Roman, 2018). Family violence, commonly known as "domestic violence" is categorized into three components: Intimate Partner Violence, Child abuse and Elderly abuse (Ryan, Esau & Roman, 2018). There are three separate legislations in place to protect each category, but they are not viewed in a holistic sense which allows for a variety of issues and problems for the victims. IPV (intimate partner violence) is categorized under The Domestic Violence act (Ryan, Esau & Roman, 2018) which provides protection for abused partners thus then creating an array of problems as the abuse of children and the elderly does not legally fall under the term "domestic violence", therefore not falling under the protection of the Domestic Violence Act (Ryan, Esau & Roman, 2018).

Although it may not seem to be such an issue but when taking legal action against perpetrators or removing/protecting the victims, the lack of cohesiveness of these legislations poses a real threat to the safety of the victims. In many cases, the perpetrator will threaten/abuse the child in order to affect the mother. So, is this then child abuse or domestic violence? How would you then successfully remove both the child and the mother when the legal definition of that act of violence falls under separate legislations and would a women's shelter or a

children's shelter intervene? Family violence is complex and because of this lack of a holistic legal approach, victims are still being abused as there is no context of the abuse. These flaws in the justice system creates space for violence to fester and is a topic that needs to be addressed.

The legalities of family violence as previously discussed, are one of the many factors at play when speaking of the complexities and dangers of violence within the domestic space. Now that the legal shortcomings regarding the subject matter have been addressed; an in-depth analysis of who family violence effects and the consequences for the victims shall be discussed. As previously mentioned, family violence can be separated into three categories: domestic violence (IPV), child abuse and elderly abuse. Types of abuse inflicted upon the victims can be physical, psychological, sexual, emotional, verbal and economic abuse (Ganley, 1994). Each form of abuse is uniquely harmful to victims and should not be compared. Furthermore, such abuse causes not only physical harm to victims but also deep psychological trauma that can result in serious long-term consequences for the victim. Those inflicting the abuse are always intentful with their behaviour (Ganley, 1994) and each outburst is calculated in order to gain control and compliance over their victim/s. Moreover, abuse isn't a result of drug or alcohol abuse, or anger issues; it is a deep-rooted psychological compulsion to have complete power over a victim, through whatever means they deem necessary (Ganley, 1994). When this abuse is defined as domestic violence it can affect all people; partners could be of the same

sex, age is irrelevant, the relationship could be short or long term and/or children may be involved and are either abused or used as weapons (Ganley, 1994). Once children have become involved it then becomes "family violence". Such violence is dangerous due to the personalized nature of the violence. As a society we are so aware of stranger violence as there are countless statistics of the likelihood of being raped or murdered because people are more likely to report stranger violence (Ganley, 1994). In addition, stranger violence has less of an effect on you as you are able to separate yourself from the abuser, whereas with family violence, you cannot (Ganley, 1994). In addition, in the case of family violence, the abuser has constant access to the victim and because of the intimate nature of the relationship they know exactly what to say/do to maintain control of them (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). It is essentially personalized abuse. As discussed in the previous paragraph, there are many legal barriers to face when it comes to reporting family abuse. The system is not set up to easily remove oneself from the situation and as a result, reporting becomes dangerous because if you are not successful, you must face the abuser.

Such abuse is widely documented when it is violence against women therefore unfortunately children are often forgotten. A child of abuse, or a child witnessing domestic violence will have irreversible psychological issues. Child development is of great importance and as children, we actively learn and replicate the behaviours of our parents (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). Children learn that the only way of resolving conflict is

through violence, in addition they develop anxiety disorders or fall into depression, have difficulty to develop empathy or they completely internalize it and as a result are unable to cultivate intimate relationships throughout their lives (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). The ramifications of child abuse or of a child witnessing abuse are endless. Nagia-Luddy and Mathews suggest that a child within that situation is the likeliest cause of violence being perpetuated unto society; essentially, all violence starts at home (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011).

Although violence often starts at home, it can be argued that the home space is heavily influenced by exterior environmental factors, no matter how secluded it may be. Furthermore, according to Nagia-Luddy and Mathews, family violence should be viewed as a form of gender-based violence (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). Within the family unit there are long standing power structures in place that are a result of these exterior environmental influences (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). Within society there has always been a gender hierarchy in place. Men have a tradition of remaining in positions of power whilst women have been viewed as inferior. An obvious, yet very real example of this inferiority is that of the issue of unequal pay or unemployment (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). Women have a longstanding history of not being paid the same wages as a man and men are often favoured when it comes to hiring people for work. This has resulted in the feminization of poverty which in-turn creates the perfect setting for domestic violence to take place as men

are placed in the positions of power says Nagia-Luddy and Mathews (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). In addition, these gender hierarchies within society uphold the ideology that the concept of masculinity is linked to dominance and violence. These exterior ideologies inform hierarchies within the family unit which opens the door for violence. Men remaining in power in society informs the power structure within the home space (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011) and family members are forced to take on roles that are perpetuated in the outside world. Roles such as women being the caregiver and/or the homemaker which then becomes not only a burden on women, but a way of keeping them "inline" and inferior. And then the role of the man is to obtain dominance and assert power over his family, as they are able to do in the outside world. As the home space is so private, these roles become difficult to question because violence can be so easily used to keep the roles in place.

The roles that society projects into the home spaces is well researched in relationship to heterosexual, privileged couples however there seems to be a lack of research into same sex couples and how those power structure transpire (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). In addition, race-relation plays a major role in the perpetuation of violence in the home. As it intersects with poverty (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011) as a result of the Apartheid regime within the context of South Africa. All of these factors influence the ability of a victim to report abuse within the home (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). With a lack of understanding of how gender and race and overall

social inequalities play a role in domestic violence, it allows for the violence to flourish and go unreported for a variety of reasons. According to Nagia-Luddy and Mathews, these social inequalities must be addressed (within the context of family violence) in order to overcome the inability to report violence safely without a fear of repercussions in the “private” space (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). Whilst my own work does not address these issues because it is highly influenced by my own past experiences, it perhaps can open up a dialogue on family violence and all its complexities in an attempt to bring about awareness on the issue.

Essentially, family violence is universally unique. There is no one academic writing that one person can relate to entirely. The family structure is complex with its own power structures and different environmental influences. My work is based on my own past experiences and the academic theory discussed is used as a way of placing or grounding my work within this specific field of trauma that is universal. By providing statistics and professional analyses it not only validates my own experience it opens up a dialogue on the complex universal issue of family violence.



Past Works

The work I have done this year has been a continuation of what I have done in previous years therefore the development of my work and concept has been a long journey. I believe in order to understand my fourth-year body of work a brief discussion of how I came to be where I am is necessary which will be analysed through a brief overview of my second and third-year pieces. In 2018, I was in my second year of my undergraduate degree at Michaelis School of Fine Art when I started approaching the subject of family violence. This subject has always been personal for me and I saw this as an opportunity to not only bring attention to this topic but also use it as a means of healing. Therefore, I began the process of attempting to visualize the most successful way to communicate my intent. Which is when I realized that although it was difficult for me, my work would have to become process based. It felt like it was the most authentic way to approach this subject and in doing so, hopefully I would be able to best bring attention to the topic in a more powerful way.

As I approached this subject, I began to think of what best represented the domestic space. I thought of what was constant within a home and came to the decision that furniture would be the most recognizable. The first piece of furniture I used was a door as I felt that it was a strong indicator of a home. I carefully cut up the door into many small fragments and followed this by slowly and painstakingly sticking the door back together. The following year I did the same but

with an array of household tables. Conceptually, both projects speak to the impact of trauma on a person. The broken furniture represents not only a broken home, but a person who has been abused by someone who is supposed to love them. The act of re-assembling this broken object was a way in which a person could heal. It speaks to resilience and a hope of creating a safe place or what a home should be. It is here where the process of this piece becomes more important than the outcome.

As the furniture is destroyed, an act of violence is done to it. Thus, speaking both to the abuse but also to the anger of the victim, who wishes to destroy any resemblance of their lack of a "family". It is both traumatizing and healing. Followed by the process of slowly re-assembling the object which showcases the person is desperately trying to build their idea of a perfect family through the object. But even as it is reassembled, it can never regain its original form nor truly function thus speaking to the idea of a family who is suffering abuse. All of which I shall speak to in greater detail in reference to my current body of work.

In my third-year piece I introduced the medium of wool. Knitting has always been therapeutic for me. The act itself is stereotypically feminine therefore it becomes domesticized. Once the furniture is destroyed, I want to rebuild it: I want to create a sense of family and safety. By knitting I can create this space of safety. Through knitting the broken pieces of wood back together, I am taking something so soft and gentle

to help mend something so jagged and dangerous.
I will now insert my artist statement from my third-year exhibition as I believe it provides context in which my current work now exists in.

"Reconstructed deconstruction

Wool is soft and gentle. I knit strands together as an act of nurturing, patience and healing.

The table is broken, by my hand. With an ax it was torn apart, leaving shattered, sharp, dangerous shards of wood, scattered. Domestic violence is something that is not seen. For some It can be a shameful secret that you are too fearful to share. It is not spoken of, it is not heard, it is not real. How can something be real if you never see it.

Bringing awareness to domestic violence is important. No one asks questions while people are suffering. So it needs to be brought to attention, it needs to be acknowledged. People's experiences need to be acknowledged.

The dining room table is a symbol of a perfect family. An object that brings people together in an intimate and safe setting. You share meals and stories, as a family should. But living within a violent home, this is not possible.

This setting is then violently ripped apart by an ax, leaving it in pieces. This is a gesture of anger, frustration and hurt. The violent action resembles the violent setting in which the object exists. The pieces left are jagged and dangerous. Unable to be repaired. You can never be the same after trauma, you as a person change, it alters you. Just like this table, after the trauma, it can no longer be what it once was.

But, I still try to repair it. The act of putting something back together speaks to resilience and the need to make a situation better.

The need to fix, to make everything appear perfect, to heal.

I have contrasted this with the wool which comes in as a gentle medium that 'holds' this damaged object together. Something so soft, so breakable is trying to keep this broken mess as one. Trying to nurture something that can't ever truly be fixed."

Current Body of Work

After completing those two original projects I had a strong foundation on what I wanted to address in my art and how I would execute it. The home is made up of distinctive rooms all of which carry significant meaning to the people who occupy them. Whether one's relationship to a space is positive or negative, you will still have specific memories attached to different spaces in your home. What I want to bring attention to in my piece is that a simple room can be incredibly significant for someone. For you, a bedroom is simply a bedroom. Or a lounge is simply a lounge. But for someone who lives in a violent home, a room could be a site of trauma; a space of anguish and fear. We associate certain objects with different rooms of the house and each object has an expectation of how it should be interacted with. A bed is a space of rest and an oven is a space to prepare food. Like rooms, these objects too can be sites of trauma. In my project both the room and the objects that occupy it are used in a way to communicate feelings of violence and distress. My project looks at the power of a mundane space and how manipulating objects can alter one's understanding of said space.

My work depicts the dining room and two bedrooms within the house. The dining room is a space where the "perfect family" come together to share meals and each other's company. It symbolizes the essence of a family as it is a site where each person has their own space. In my piece, I acquired a dining

room table and four chairs all of which were in semi-perfect condition. I then violently broke them apart into many pieces. I deconstructed the notion of a perfect family by destroying the objects that once symbolized togetherness and safety. This act of destruction is multi-faceted. On one hand I am angrily dismantling the family structure because in a violent home you are made to act as if there is nothing wrong, that you are the "perfect family". Because of this, it makes it incredibly difficult to seek help as the likelihood of someone believing you is low. On the other hand, the violence the object normally silently witnesses is now the one violence is being inflicted upon. Once an object has been broken it can never truly be restored to how it once was. Which speaks to how once someone has been traumatized or abused, it alters you and shifts your perspective on the world and how you interact with it. As a child, you are growing and learning how you exist in a space, but if you are being abused, or witnessing abuse, that development is hindered (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). Studies have shown that children who are abused are equally affected as children who are forced to witness abuse (Ganley, 1994). In addition they are essentially set up for future victimization (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011).



Once the objects have been deconstructed, I slowly, piece by piece reassemble the object. This process speaks to resilience. The process itself is painstaking and takes an excessive amount of time. Just as a human being will forever be altered by trauma, so will this object. I will never be able to restore it into what it once was. But I still try. This act represents someone trying to “fix” a violent home. A home that they still must live in. They are not only trying to heal the home; they are also trying to heal themselves. Before its deconstruction, the object was a representation of the domestic space. It was a constant in a turbulent home. Now, like you, it has gone through trauma. The object now becomes a more accurate representation of what the domestic space is for victims of family violence. The narrative of the room itself changes. It is no longer telling the story of a happy family but rather a statement of what it feels like to live in a space of fear and discomfort. The stillness of broken furniture in an empty room brings attention to the loneliness of being a victim, being unable to speak up for fear of being caught. Its stillness is both assertive and haunting. This same ideology and process is applied to the two bedrooms I created. One single bed symbolizing a child and one double bed symbolizing a parent’s room.

Through the creation of these three rooms my work becomes a truer example of the family home with all of its members being represented. They now not only have a seat at the table but also their own room thus making the experience of this installation piece more real. You can now identify the essence of the family members through the intimacy of their broken

beds and altered rooms.

In my discussion of my work from last year, I spoke about the introduction of wool into my sculpture piece, with specific attention to the act of knitting. I found that to be a crucial part of my process-based journey as I discovered it to be meditative and healing. Traditionally, knitting has been associated as a women’s hobby. As previously discussed, a domestic space is most strongly associated with the feminine because within a patriarchal society it has always been the women’s duty to run the home. Therefore any “domestic task” has become inherently feminine. Whilst this long-standing theme of sexism in relation to the domestic space is something that we as a society are slowly attempting to overturn, it is still very much a reality for the majority of women within our modern society. Societal norms dictate that men are in positions of power both in and out of the home. Every aspect of our public life influences the lives we live within our home. As long as men are receiving preferential treatment in society, that power structure will manifest within our home environments. The act of knitting can be viewed as a result of sexist power structures both in and out of the home which is one of the reasons I bring knitting into my piece so to question this notion and reclaim it.

In my body of work this year, I decided to create my own wool that is so large I must use my arms as the needles. The creation of the wool itself is straining and tedious. The wool is self-made thus showing the effort and care put into the

medium I wish to use as an act of healing. Each tube is cut and sewn together. Turned inside out and then stuffed with batting. I then use this wool in both the sculptural pieces and the performance video. The deconstructed furniture that was destroyed by violence is now being mended by the feminine act of knitting. The soft wool in opposition to the jagged wood speaks to the strength of women and children overcoming family violence. It showcases compassion for the object I violently destroyed. The wool fully encompasses these broken objects, holding them together and turning it into a space of safety. The broken objects and the wool manifest into one piece that functions both as a signifier of violence and as a representation of healing. This is all done by using the performative action of knitting as a form of solidifying safety. Using the medium of wool and the action of knitting, I create a space in which I feel safe, but in reality I am in no way protected by it.







In a video performance I show how the actual knitting is done, and in doing so I am finally able to bring myself into the piece. I have become the needle. Up until this point I had removed myself from the piece and worked with it as an outsider trying to mend wounds I did not want to truly confront. By using large wool, it allows my body to be a part of the process and therefore the final piece. I fully immerse myself into my pieces because my body and its experiences are an integral part of the work as a whole. I use my own body to knit, I become the needle; my body becomes the tool. I bring myself into the violence, willingly. The piece becomes an extension of myself and my own journey. The process is equally, if not more important than the outcome. This is evident in the performance video that showcases myself tirelessly trying to knit with my arms. The performance is 28 minutes long and it is apparent how difficult it becomes as the video progresses. It is difficult to move past trauma, which is what this video represents.





Conclusion:

My fourth-year body of work can be viewed as two separate processes joining together to create one cohesive piece. By violently deconstructing objects as an act of frustration, the work becomes therapeutic. You are able to physically see the ramifications of family violence represented through these deconstructed objects which can lead to a space of healing. By slowly mending these broken objects; I am showing a space of violence tenderness and care, thus showcasing resilience. Through the introduction of self-made wool, I create a safe space for the objects to "heal". The act of the knitting itself is too therapeutic. This feminine and domestic act is used to mend domestic objects. Objects that were met with such violence are now being held together with something so gentle and made with care. Through video performance I document this process as a way of showcasing the importance of my own body being a part of the work. Once a site of trauma is now a site of healing. As I mend the broken objects with the wool, I create this safe place. By using my body as a tool for healing, I create a space of safety. I can rebuild the notion of what a home is to me and how I wish to exist in it, without violence. At its' core, my work deals with domestic violence and my past experiences with it. Through process-based art and performance art I allow myself to work through my experiences. I try to rectify the past by reconstructing violently deconstructed domestic objects and then mending these broken objects with the soft wool I have created. In doing so, I am able to mend past traumas and allow for room to heal.



























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Knit me whole again

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