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Touchy-Feely, Gross Stuff

Elise Marie Robbins
University of Mississippi

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TOUCHY-FEELY, GROSS STUFF

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Fine Arts Degree
The University of Mississippi

Elise Robbins

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ABSTRACT

Physical affection and visible emotion were not the way of my family while I was growing up. Compassion, concern, judgement, and almost all sentiment were expressed verbally. To me this was very normal, and as an only child I did not have much to compare it to until I started school. It was there that I saw children and adults convey emotion not just with words but also with a physical display. Though the idea of outwardly expressing emotion was not foreign to me, it was not exactly natural either and I struggle with it to this day. For this reason, I have constantly been asking people to describe an emotional sensation as if it were an object.

In general people’s perception, abstract ideas, and textures are described with tactile words such as smooth, distorted, and mushy. We understand these feelings because of the touch sensation associated with them. Touch may be the most used and the most understated sense that we have. From the second we are born everything becomes tangible. It is through this tangibility that we come to understand our realities. By touching we prove to ourselves and to others that things are undeniably real and that they do not only exist in our heads.

In this thesis, using handmade biomorphic forms, I explore the perplexing concept of emotion with a collection of soft sculptures through which the viewer can experience emotional and physical sensations. These forms are an amalgamation of psychological that are brought to life through a process of hand stitching similar and disparate materials together. The final abstract forms are my interpretations of what emotions can look and feel like.
DEDICATION

To ama

Thank you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor, Associate Professor Durant Thompson. His door was always open long before I went this route. He allowed my work to be my own, but helped to reign me in when necessary. I will always be grateful for letting me bend your ear about whatever I was working on and also for allowing me to be an honorary member of team sculpture.

I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Professor Virginia Rougon Chavis and Visiting Assistant Professor Tina Lutz. Ginny, your efforts to help me reach the finish line have not gone unnoticed. Tina, I can see light! Thank you for helping me to unbury my words from the detritus.

To my tribe; Sara, Karl, and Dan your friendship kept the momentum going so that I could reach this goal. Thank yous are in order, though they will never be enough. To my area buddy, Brad Luke I am so incredibly grateful for you and the pleasure of your company. Grad school would not have been the same without you. To my sculpture peeps, Seth and Stacey, it is with more gratitude than I can express here that I say your support, friendship, and oft sought opinions were the reason I could power through the tough stuff.

Kevin, you are the best. Thank you for all the things that you do for me, I love you to eternity and back.
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CHAPTER I

CONCEPT

*Touchy-Feely, Gross Stuff* is a body of work that addresses various emotions in different states through visual and tactile interpretation. Touch is something we do every day. We touch objects with the intent for which they were made, our clothing touches us, we touch one another to express sentiments from rage to joy and everything in between. However, in traditional gallery or museum settings, touch is either expressly or implicitly forbidden. This means that we rarely get to experience art in the ways we normally experience life. Much like children we are admonished “You see with your eyes, not with your hands.”

The objects created for this thesis are meant to be physical expressions of emotions; a way to understand that which by its very nature is abstract. The tactile experience is one that allows me to better interpret and understand the world around me. To help the viewer interpret the work in this thesis, they are challenged to experience the sculptures through touch. Encountering the objects presented in *Touchy-Feely, Gross Stuff* with physical contact asks the viewer to go against the ingrained notion of what is acceptable in a gallery setting. It creates a feeling of “Should I?”, “Can I?”, unsettledness. This body of work presents what emotions and feelings can look and feel like through a collection of organic soft sculpture.

The physical representations of emotion that I have created run a gamut from repulsion to attraction. Many of the works exhibit attributes of these concurrently. The forms themselves can be visually read as shapes and growths analogous to what you might find in a Petrie dish or a
medical textbook from the past. This is not an accident. I have always had a fascination with medical imagery from history, specifically, nineteenth century illustrations. Many historical images demonstrate the strange and fascinating things that were being introduced to the body due to poor hygiene, industrialization and urbanization. The types of images that I am most interested in from that century have been collected in *The Sick Rose* by Richard Barnett. It shows the spread of epidemics through the use of colored lithographs. The images in this book that I drew particular inspiration from show the growths of lesions and pustules that affect the skin (Barnett). Some of the objects in this thesis visually re-inforce excess growth like that of a malignancy. For many, the idea of touching items that resemble lesions full of a septic substance will elicit revulsion. For others, the ability to interact physically with the art in a place where such a thing is uncommon could itself be a source of attraction. Some objects presented in this thesis have varying tactility. For some viewers, this is another draw for them to interact with the piece.

‘Touchy-Feely’ as defined by The Merriam-Webster Dictionary is an adjective that means to encourage interpersonal touching and the free expression of emotions. For me it has the added bonus of referencing physical touch, which is an option open to the viewer. When the rest of the title is added, ‘Gross Stuff,’ this alludes to the slang use of the term ‘touchy-feely’ as in too emotional. This works well to further reference the idea of shared feelings and physical contact being disagreeable. Likewise, the addition of the term ‘gross stuff’ to the title suggests that the objects themselves maybe in fact be a boil caused by emotions ready to explode at the slightest touch, creating a disgust factor that hints at the lithographs I took inspiration from.
CHAPTER II
TOUCH

“Touch is ten times stronger than verbal or emotional contact, and it affects damn near everything we do. No other sense can arouse you like touch. We forget that touch is not only basic to our species but the key to it.” – Saul Schanberg

Music croons about it, poets wax nostalgic regarding it, and it has been depicted in art through the ages. Touch, our most used and most basic sense, is with us from the moment we come into this world and on through to the moment that we leave it. When we touch one another physically we tend to do so to express emotion; sympathy, rage, love or a host of other thoughts and sentiments. We touch as a way of communicating.

This need to handle items in order to understand them is nothing new. Our bodies, when fully grown, have roughly 18 square feet of skin, which is our largest sense organ (Field). This fact means that our body is relentlessly ready to receive messages regarding touch. These messages help us distinguish and recognize the various meanings of different tactile sensations. When we touch something, we are aware of how that object feels against our skin. When that physical feeling matches up with how we think an object should feel, we create a sense memory based on touch, also known as haptic sense (Paterson). An example of this haptic sensation would be akin to touching the red coil of a burner on the stove. When this happens, we remember that not only is the burner hot to the touch when it is that color, but also that the color of red
present at that moment will continue to indicate the visual sensation of heat and or burning in our future. Items that appear optically appealing may also have a visual tactility resulting from the materials that have been used to present them.

“The feeling of an object touching our skin is simultaneously an awareness of the materiality of the object and an awareness of the spatial limits and sensations of our lived body” (Paterson). Different textures produce a variety of sentiments for us based on our own experiences. Fabric is a good example of this. Different fabrics have varying textures and weights. Textiles have a variety of uses but by using generalizations we can equate them to almost everybody. T-shirts are typically made of a soft jersey cotton, denim for jeans, corduroy for jackets, satin for special occasion clothing, and so on. I personally relate crushed velvet to the formal wear of my youth. We all have different relationships to various textiles. This makes us much more likely to attempt to gain a tactile familiarity with an object, in an effort to gain an understanding of something from our prior knowledge. Using different textures on my sculptures invites the viewer to interact with them through touch. By doing this the viewer brings in their own haptic memory of that textile while also creating a new haptic memory related to my work.

Being a very tactile person myself, I feel compelled to touch objects to fully interpret them. The various physical and emotional connotations that can be drawn from touching different textures in fabrics is the reason I chose them to represent an assortment of emotion or haptic feelings. Expressing a feeling is an intimate show of trust and the idea of making them tangible exposes them for all their pitfalls. The amorphous objects I have made embody the idea of being able to physically develop and experience emotions through the haptic sense.
I grew up living with just my mother. We visited her side of the family most weekends and at every holiday. This family was headed by my grandmother. When we were at grandma’s, what grandma said went. My grandmother immigrated to the United States from Gernika in the Basque Country of Spain in 1941. Based upon many verbal accounts from my mother and aunt, my grandmother and I were like oil and water from the time we could communicate with each other. Crying was met with spankings and admonishment from her. What she deemed as loud laughter was shushed and scolded into silence. Hugs and pats on the back for a job well done were expressed with a stoically verbal “I guess you did alright.” So, that is how I learned to show emotion; matter-of-factly, verbally, and with little to no physical emotion. It was not until I started interacting more regularly with people outside of my mother’s side of the family that I discovered that things were pretty different for other people.

Growing up, I would frequently ask people to describe what they were feeling as they were feeling it. As I grew older this question turned into a form of teasing from other children and adults in my world so I pushed this question from my mind and focused on how people acted when they had an emotion. I was always watching others; family, people on the bus, friends, and everyone in between in order to try and discern what emotions were being expressed.

In this body of work, I am answering the question I posed to others so long ago, “What does what you are feeling look like?” For me, expressing many types of emotions does not come
naturally and my tendency is to block them out. Sometimes they come out as a confused and jumbled thoughts mixed together with other feelings that may not be appropriate for the situation. For this reason, when making these sculptures, the different fabrics are pushing up against and bulging out of one another. Due to my emotions being tamped down and tangled from an early age, I represent this through the twisting tension of some of the pieces and by using contrasting tactile materials.

By squeezing and twisting the fabric membrane, I create a visual and tactile spectacle, which gives the viewer the opportunity to break the tension by interacting with the objects. Some of the materials have an opacity that obfuscates the inside of the object, while others allow you to see the viscera that makes up the inside of the emotion. As discussed in Chapter II, different fabrics can bring forth different ideas associated with haptic senses. Velvet, for example, in a bright color could be seen as playful, while other colors could express emergence, and darker colors suggesting sensuality. A color that appears sumptuous to the eye may entice you closer in order to touch, but up close that texture or color could overwhelm you, spiking anxiety and fear (Holt & Skov).

Using abstract forms seemed the most obvious way for me to interpret and express emotion. Emotions or feelings are ideas that are by definition, abstract and pliable. By employing textiles with various textures, patterns, and malleability, I visually represent a range of emotions through stitched fabrics that speak of sensations that we can literally touch and feel. The organic nature of these objects give the forms an emotional and soft aesthetic, that invite the viewer to experience them through sight and touch. The bulbous shape of the objects can also read as growths. The concept of emotion as a growth or a blemish aligns well with how I regarded emotions for years growing up. I considered emotions akin to pimples and bacteria that could be
present in a Petri dish. These bacterial emotions cluster, seep, permeate, and ooze out of us while causing relentless pain. Like wounds or scars caused by blights or feelings, eventually we are forced to deal with them either by keeping them contained or letting them gush forth and heal.

*Touchy-Feely, Gross Stuff* is a form of healing through tangible, inviting biomorphic forms.
CHAPTER IV
ARTISTIC INFLUENCES AND PROCESS

“It’s not that the creative act and the critical act are simultaneous. It’s more like you blurt something out and then analyze it.” -Robert Motherwell

“I was really drawn to working with my hands. It was more about using my body as the tool and having a direct relationship with the material.” -Orly Genger

The Abstract Expressionist movement is a large influence on my work. Artists involved in this movement, such as Robert Motherwell, valued spontaneity, improvisation, and placed a high value on process. My work is made in a similar fashion. I cut and sew pieces of fabric at a whim, shaping my designs based on my emotions. I work by instinct, letting my feelings inform my choices of shape, color, pattern, tension, softness, and more. The end result itself functions not unlike an actor in the creative process. As I construct it, my emotions surrounding the piece are sometimes altered, informing my next decision. The act of making itself is an integral part of the art.

Eva Hesse’s work relies heavily on process. The end-product is not the principal focus of the work. Rather, the process itself reveals the artist. I have always enjoyed working with my hands and tend toward disciplines that rely heavily on process, like sculpture. For me like Genger states in the above quote, having a physical interaction with each part of the process
down to the final finishing touches, influences each step of my process. I find this way of making art enjoyable because it further reveals the hand of the artist to the viewer.

Hesse’s work has been defined as repetitive and labor intensive. I find that when making I tend to choose materials that require quite a bit of repetitive action. With this current body of work, I am constantly sewing the same types of stitches over and over while manipulating the stuffed material with my hands and body in order to get the fabric to react the way that I intend it to. Like Hesse’s work with process, the outcome of these emotion sculptures is formed by the process.

Louis Bourgeois’ work has always fascinated me. Her use of the surreal, and abstract along with investigations of psychological emotions, such as fear and vulnerability, draw me in. *Cells* is a work of Bourgeois that I connected with when making my own work in this thesis. *Cells* speaks to the concept of physical, emotional, psychological, and intellectual ideas. Representing these abstract ideas in a way that draws the viewer in and explores the abject is something that I strive for in my thesis.

In *Touchy-Feely, Gross Stuff* each sculpture is made of a variety of fabrics and then stuffed with poly-fil. Each fabric has a different texture, even if only slightly apparent to the touch. Owing to the complexity of emotion I wanted to give each object a tactile and pliable feel. The viewer could then relate a physical sensation to the visual interpretation which then might trigger their own feelings about that sensation. The poly-fil also acts as a form of texture itself. Due to its fundamental softness poly-fil is used on the inside of stuffed toys to give the form shape and snuggly softness. Here the filling acts similarly, drawing the viewer towards the shape because of the visual softness. This gives some of the objects a cuddly presence, while in others that are overstuffed, it offers an unpleasant sensation. What’s more, in the event of some more
translucent and stretched materials, it provides a veiled idea of a substance ready to burst out of its casing.

Patterns and colors can also cause feelings of attraction and revulsion in viewers due in part to societal connotations and the participants own personal views. Patterns work as a visual and physical representation of ideas. Paisley, for example has a long history so it very well could remind one of the 1960’s, or of cowboy’s bandannas (Stewart). Our perspectives on patterns can be influenced by our history. The floral print is perhaps the most widely used in textiles and home interiors. The florals remind us of gardens, grandmother’s couch, the wallpaper in the doctor’s office, and more subconsciously of the cycle of life. In the sculpture Venus, I use a floral pattern. Domesticity, and femininity can be inferred from the small orange blossoms present in the piece. The color of floral reminiscent of a time gone by. In contrast, the other printed piece, Squeezed Out, has an abstracted cube style. This non-objective pattern may be purely ornamental or it may bring up a consciousness that we were previously unaware of. It may trigger a memory where a similar is pattern is present.

Some emotions get tamped down and fester until a person eventually explodes or implodes. The tension and unease of not expressing the emotion is present in the tightly stretched, tied, and over-stuffed fabrics. This pressure not only gives visual but tactile tension by changing the original texture of the fabric. In Clowning Around, I created the orange base shape first and then stuffed it until the seams started to protrude in certain areas. I continued this process with each of the additional fabrics that were added. This expands the material distorting it and giving the fabric a different tactility then it would have if normally stretched or not stretched at all. The straining of the material also subtly suggests the inevitable emotion bubbling to the surface for everyone around us to see.
Motherwell’s quote at the beginning of the chapter is true of how I made work for this thesis. Each piece presented in, *Touchy-Feely, Gross Stuff*, is in reaction to a feeling I had in the moment of each step of the process. The result is that of raw emotion made physical by the action of feeling and doing. Once finished with the piece I could then evaluate how I felt and what that meant to me and how it would relate to the viewer.
CHAPTER V

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

*Touchy-Feely, Gross Stuff* consists of eleven free standing sculptures and two wall pieces. All of the pieces in this body of work are representations of emotions depicted in soft biomorphic forms. Each piece is made in a similar fashion to the others.
GRODY

Liverpool Double Knit, Poly-fil, Hand Stitched and Machine Sewn
2016

In this piece, I used a liverpool double knit in the color sulphur as the base and a liverpool double knit in pale aqua for the nodules. The base was sewn together using a Brother 1034D thread surger with Maxi-Lock stretch thread and then stuffed with polyester fiber fill. The pale aqua nodules were then hand sewn to the base using bonded nylon sewing thread. Before being sewn shut each nodule was stuffed polyester fiber fill.
GNAW

4-Way Stretch Vinyl, Milliskin Matte Spandex, Upholstery Foam, Poly-Fil, Hand Stitched
2016

In this piece, I used a single piece of 18” x 18” x 2” high density upholstery foam as a base in order to hand sew the individual pieces of fabric to it. The green nodules are a 4-way stretch vinyl in neon lime color. The additional nodules are made with a chartreuse milliskin matte 4-way stretch spandex. Each piece was hand sewn using bonded nylon thread and stuffed using polyester fiber fill.
SQUEEZED OUT
Printed Spandex, Upholstery Foam, Poly-fil, Hand Stitched
2016

This piece has a 24” x 36” x 3” high density upholstery foam backing. Using an abstracted cube printed 4-way stretch fabric, I hand sewed individual pieces to the upholstery foam using bonded nylon thread. Before being sewn shut each piece was stuffed polyester fiber fill. One half of a wooden French cleat was sewn into the back of the piece in order to hang the work.
COMFORT

Pantyhose, Upholstery Pins, Pink Foam, Poly-fil, Hand Stitched
2016

This infrastructure of this piece is insulated sheathing. Nylon pantyhose of tan, nude, and white were cut into strips and laid flat on the insulation. Nylon was then individually stretched and pinned to the sheathing using upholstery pins. After the initial pinning, they were stuffed with polyester fiber fill. The pantyhose were layered and stuffed in a random patterning to form an abstracted shape. Parts of the outermost layer have been hand sewn shut using invisible thread to contain the polyester fiber fill.
ENTHUSIASM

High Performance Spandex, Milliskin Matte Spandex, Poly-fil, Machine Sewn, Hand Stitched
2016

In this piece, I used a 4-way stretch high performance spandex in yellow for the base and a milliskin matte 4-way stretch in the color turquoise for nodules. The base was sewn together using a Brother 1034D thread surger with Maxi-Lock stretch thread and then stuffed with polyester fiber fill. The turquoise nodules were then hand sewn to the base using bonded nylon sewing thread. Before being sewn shut each nodule was stuffed polyester fiber fill.
POLISH HER UP A LITTLE

Honeycomb Double Knit, Foil Lame Knit Spandex, Poly-Fil, Machine Sewn, Hand Stitched

2016

In this piece, I used a honeycomb double knit in the color blush for the base and a foil lame knit spandex in 4-way stretch in silver for the nodules. The base was sewn together using a Brother 1034D thread surger with Maxi-Lock stretch thread and then stuffed with polyester fiber fill. The silver nodules were then hand sewn to the base using bonded nylon sewing thread. Before being sewn shut each nodule was stuffed polyester fiber fill.
VENUS

Printed Spandex, Upholstery Foam, Poly-Fil, Hand Stitched
2016

This piece has a 24” x 36” x 3” high density upholstery foam backing. Using a floral printed 4-way stretch fabric, I hand sewed individual pieces to the upholstery foam using bonded nylon thread. Before being sewn shut each piece was stuffed polyester fiber fill. One half of a wooden French cleat was sewn into the back of the piece in order to hang the work.
BLIGHTED

Milliskin Matte Spandex, Poly-Fil, Machine Sewn, Hand Stitched

2016

In this piece, I used a 4-way stretch milliskin matte spandex in magenta for the base and a milliskin matte 4-way stretch in the color olive for nodules. The base was sewn together using a Brother 1034D thread surger with Maxi-Lock stretch thread and then stuffed with polyester fiber fill. The pale olive was then hand sewn to the base using bonded nylon sewing thread. Before being sewn shut each nodule was stuffed polyester fiber fill.
CLOWNING AROUND

Velvet, Rip Stop, Stretch Cotton Jersey, Poly-Fil, Machine Sewn, Hand Stitched
2016

In this piece, I used a 2-way stretch velvet in orange for the base. On this piece two different nodules of different materials are also present. One nodule is a 2-way stretch cotton jersey in chartreuse and the other is nylon rip stop in purple. The base was sewn together using a Brother 1034D thread surger with Maxi-Lock stretch thread and then stuffed with polyester fiber fill. The chartreuse and purple nodules were then hand sewn to the base using bonded nylon sewing thread. Before being sewn shut each nodule was stuffed polyester fiber fill.
BUOYED BY PEACE OF MIND
Crushed Velvet, High Performance Spandex, Milliskin Matte Spandex, Poly-Fil, Machine Sewn, Hand Stitched
2016

In this piece, I used a 4-way stretch milliskin matte spandex in jade for the base. On this piece two different nodules of different materials are also present. One nodule is a 2-way stretch crushed velvet in orange and the other is a 4-way high performance spandex in yellow. The base was sewn together using a Brother 1034D thread surger with Maxi-Lock stretch thread and then stuffed with polyester fiber fill. The orange and yellow nodules were then hand sewn to the base using bonded nylon sewing thread. Before being sewn shut each nodule was stuffed polyester fiber fill.
ANXIETY

Flannel, Liverpool Knit, Milliskin Matte Spandex, Poly-Fil, Machine Sewn, Hand Stitched
2016

For this piece, I used a purple flannel in jade for the base. Also present are nodules of two different materials. One nodule is a Liverpool double knit in red and the other is a 4-way milliskin matte spandex in neon yellow. The base was sewn together using a Brother 1034D thread surger with Maxi-Lock stretch thread and then stuffed with polyester fiber fill. The red and neon yellow nodules were then hand sewn to the base using bonded nylon sewing thread. Before being sewn shut each nodule was stuffed polyester fiber fill.
SOPORIFIC

Milliskin Matte Spandex, Poly-fil, Hand Stitched and Machine Sewn
2016

For this piece I used all milliskin matte spandex in 4-way stretch for all pieces. The pieces alternate in color from turquoise, light mint, and peach. The turquoise color was sewn together using a Brother 1034D thread surger with Maxi-Lock stretch thread and then stuffed with polyester fiber fill. The light mint and peach pieces were then individually hand sewn to the base using bonded nylon sewing thread. Before being sewn shut each nodule was stuffed polyester fiber fill.
SUMPTUOUS

Hatchi Knit, Faux Leather, Poly-fil, Hand Stitched
2016

For this piece, I used a grape slub hatchi jersey knit with 4-way stretch for the base. The nodules attached to the based are faux leather in grey. The base was sewn together using a Brother 1034D thread surger with Maxi-Lock stretch thread and then stuffed with polyester fiber fill. The grey nodules were then hand sewn to the base using bonded nylon sewing thread. Before being sewn shut each nodule was stuffed polyester fiber fill.
TOUCHY-FEELY, GROSS STUFF GALLERY INSTALLATION
TOUCHY-FEELY, GROSS STUFF GALLERY INSTALLATION
TOUCHY-FEELY, GROSS STUFF GALLERY INSTALLATION
TOUCHY-FEELY, GROSS STUFF GALLERY INSTALLATION
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This thesis involved taking an abstract idea and transforming it into a tangible reality. Unlike traditional sculptural works found in a gallery or museum, the work presented in Touchy-Feely, Gross Stuff was created with viewer interaction in mind. Viewers were able to interact with the sculptures through touch, allowing them to explore their own haptic senses. Through this physical connection, viewers were able to experience the objects in the same way they experience the everyday life around them; through touch.

As this thesis came to a close, I felt that the body of work could potentially grow into large-scale installations. I found that I really enjoy creating objects that involve viewer interaction through touch and I plan to expand on this concept. With this work, I have only scratched the surface of how people see, feel, and interpret emotion. There seems to be more research that can be done in this realm and I look forward to exploring it in future endeavors.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Elise Robbins was born in Soda Springs, Idaho and was relocated to Boise, Idaho at a young age. She attended private Catholic school for some years before eventually transferring to a public school. As an only child and a latchkey kid, Robbins' mother enrolled her in a number of after-school programs to keep her child busy and out of trouble. In these after school programs Elise learned a variety of art and craft forms such as ceramics, sewing, and crochet. Robbins carried these lessons with her when she went on to college at Boise State University where she graduated with a BFA in visual arts with a double emphasis in printmaking and in sculpture.

With the skills that Robbins acquired she has been an assistant at the Frogman’s Print and Paper Workshops twice. She has also had print works accepted into Delta National Small Prints, and Southern Graphics Council International exhibitions. In addition, Robbins, has been invited to participate in many print portfolios. Elise continued to work in print and sculpture medias while pursuing an MFA at the University of Mississippi.