


issue no. 7

THE GRAY ZONE



at the core

VULNERABILITY + DESIGN PUBLICATION



editor's letter:

2022 became an uphill battle, one that I never overcame.

Few know this secret I've kept, so this is my first public acknowledgment: I ended my long-term relationship last August. I'd love to say it set me on a better path, but the truth is that I'm not there yet. In reality, it threw me into the deep end of murky water. I found myself drowning in thoughts, barely treading above the surface and struggling to find reason to keep treading.

The past months have been some of the most anxiety-provoking and crisis-inducing months of my entire life. Some days, I'm not sure who I am or what matters to me. It's earth-shattering to watch the life you're living and the future you imagine dissipate before you. But it was my choice to wash it all away, and instead, brave the unknown.

The Gray Zone is about transitions; the in-between moments. It is the unplanned events and intrusive thoughts that derail our progress, challenge our self image, and ultimately shape our lives, though we may not know how yet.

This issue is healing disguised as pain, yet a bridge to the next chapter. I hope that with the new year, you find solace in the mundane, a quiet strength in the messiness, and offer kindness to yourself as you define the life you want to live.

Ibby Day
Editor in Chief

AT
THE
CORE

ATC is an independent, not-for-profit publication driven by passion and a goal of sharing stories and artwork that remind us that we're all human at the core. If you'd like to be in our next issue, please email ibbyday@gmail.com

Paper:
Hammermill 60lb Color Copy Digital Cover

acknowledgments:

At The Core is elated to announce Anna Grace Cook as ATC's Copyeditor. You may remember Anna as a writer from the last issue, but truth be told, Anna has been involved in ATC since the beginning. She has been someone I can bounce ideas off of and get critical feedback from. It humbles me that her passion for this publication matches mine, and I know I can always count on her to be a supporter of what I do next.

At The Core also celebrates Athena Aquino for designing this issue's stunning cover. I could not think of a better person to design it as Athena has been by my side while I experience what this issue is all about; navigating the gray zone. Outside of work, Athena invites me on day trips, themed parties, and impromptu dinners. She has made sure I am not alone as I figure out what comes next. Athena is an incredible friend, and I knew that she would nail this cover and all my feelings and thoughts entangled with the theme.



anna&
copyeditor

athena
cover designer

copyeditor's letter:

Here is what you will need to survive this ATC issue with your ducks in a row: courage, an open mind, and maybe a pillow to weep on. From letting go of lost love in 2022, to embracing the grass in between your toes in 2023, I hope reading this latest issue will leave you breathless. **The Gray Zone** beautifully conveys the gift of vulnerability and the significant role it plays in new beginnings. The collection of works will humbly instill a newfound vigor to honor the unknown, respect the past, and call out your grief by name. Special thanks to Ibby Day, founder and editor in chief of At the Core — you are the thread that ties together a series of unapologetic human experience!

Anna Grace Cook
Copyeditor

“When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

a new promise

ibby day

10.19.2022

There are moments I find myself missing you deeply.

After work, eyes peeling from my screen for the first time in hours, I'm quickly reminded that there's no one to hug. It's especially difficult when it's been a hard day and all I want is to be wrapped in safety.

Sometimes a song will come on, one I used to play over and over in the car, and I'll smile softly thinking about how you'd scold me for listening to it again.

When I clean, I'll uncover remnants of the life we shared, and find myself suddenly uneasy about the life I must now reshape, abandoning the one we promised to another.

Friends tell me I'm handling this well, and maybe I am, but I can't help but think that most of them get filtered versions of my worst days.

The days my future feels cold and empty, and my head won't let me believe otherwise. The days when I run until I can't breathe, so I'm too exhausted to feel the pressure of how much my heart hurts. The days that I drive for hours so I don't have to figure out how to contain all my dark thoughts.

Sometimes I wonder why you stayed with me, and why I let you go. It's a foolish thought that only lasts a moment, but a moment nonetheless. I'll remind myself of everything that I have to offer, but I know you'd be mad at me for thinking these thoughts at all. You've always wanted the best for me, and perhaps that's why it feels foolish to have let you go.

I often resist the urge to text you, knowing that my heart won't heal if I let you back in. There are many things I haven't told you, for your comfort but also mine. It feels like I'm keeping secrets from you. Something unfamiliar to me. I can't talk to you honestly anymore, and that's the part that hurts the most. I lost a partner, but I also lost my best friend. The only person in this world who knew me as well as myself.

But I don't want this to seem like regret, if you happen to read my words. You asked me to be honest with you, and my answer hasn't changed- this wasn't a mistake.

What would feel foolish to me, more so than letting you go, is not chasing after what I want and need from life.

I'll admit, I don't know what comes next. But the unknown pulls me in. It's been a fascination of mine- to discover beauty in people and the world. And truthfully, some days it makes me feel crazy, but I'll brazenly charge into new experiences, despite hardships, because I'm in love with how romantic life can be.

And I know you know this about me. And I know you'd want this for me too, even if you're not by my side to cheer me on anymore. But I hope one day we can rekindle a friendship once time has healed us both. So for now, thank you. I promise you, and me, one day this decision will make sense.

tzasna espinosa

1. What types of personal experiences influence your work?

I create to process what I see in the world. What is worthy of celebration, what is fascinating, what I wish to see which is not there. And as I come to realize, that above all, I'm a designer who needs to create no matter what medium. I look back on some paintings I did when I was a teen and see a lot of the topics that are still of interest to me: my culture, my tenderness, my experiences with friends, family and community, and the possibilities of existing outside of binaries.

Nowadays I draw plants a lot because they have an effortless way of cheering me up. They are in endless growth and decay, cycles of change that are comforting, that I aspire to embrace. So when I feel like I need it, I will sew a bag for myself because I can't find one that fits the exact sketchbook I own. I will draw a nonbinary couple kissing because I crave representation. I will make a zine because I recognize the importance of sharing information. I create to share the experiences I find worthy of being lived.



2. Describe a time you felt lost during your creative process.

When the outcome in a step of the process doesn't align with my vision, I feel lost. This does not mean that all creative endeavors need a formal purpose. In fact the most rewarding creations are ones where I have no idea where I will end up. I think this is why it is easy to burn out or lose interest in your art. Once you turn it into a job, a must do, you can only see the goal. The way to get to the end gets lost, there's no longer joy in the process, and all you can think about is how what you have at any moment is not the goal. I want to keep myself in perpetual process, acknowledging what I have and create at every step. Without attaching myself too much to the final result, I want to be able to go back in the process, test, and let go of things that don't work.

3. How would you define being "successful" as an artist?

The short answer is that I'd like to be well compensated for my artmaking and design. But I find it even more important to be falling in love with creating, in any form possible. I feel successful everytime I get into flow and when I am in awe of what I make.



4. Have you ever felt like you've failed as an artist? When/why?

I've had a lot of failures, and most of them lead to learning whenever I try something new. With art, however, the hurtful failures are the ones that waste time and money, and usually involve abandoning a project. But even then, I value those failures as a learning experience. I wish our culture valued failure as a form of learning. Blame rarely helps anyone.

5. What are you looking forward to this year (art related or not)?

I'm looking forward to finishing school, to making more mistakes, to reading books from my unfinished pile, to feeling like I am enough more often, to drinking delicious teas, stepping in more puddles, and having dirty fingernails from gardening.

brackish

laura solomon

Gray is a rainbow, see? Warm gray, cool gray. Gather a few and line them up close so they're all touching: your favorite scarf, a translucent plastic bottle of water, a faded t-shirt, old sneakers, a butter knife, mushy grime from the cracks in a bar of old soap. Too many densities, temperatures, textures to encompass with a single tonal descriptor. The sleek aspirational neutrality of fashionable kitchen tools, a peeling wooden table left outdoors since before your cat died.

There are bad grays. The crepuscular dimness of shoddy indoor afternoons when I was a child meant to be napping while the adults make unhappy grownup talk. Not the warm light of the photographer's golden hour, just gathering shadows and a queasiness in the belly, in the middle part of the body meant to absorb nutrients but is instead itself absorbed, churning, straining to reject all the life I can see, all the life I know.

You'd think the passage of so many decades would make for safe distance, would draw the teeth so that memory's bite was only a pressure, still unpleasant but no longer capable of breaking skin.

It's no sweet clean fast-running stream, memory. Marshland estuarial, sluggish, rotten with fecundity, self-fertilized. Odorous and un-sunned, undifferentiated seepages too churned and muddy to classify into virilities of self-standing form. A muck of too-much, like the previous appalling sentence as it lumbered past the delta.

The female, appalling ooze, neither salt nor sweet, un-whole-some in its formless contingency, lying at openings of transition where the land pokes out into the sea and also sucks in the sea, where the sea comes in to soak the land. A trickster with nothing to grab.

It was a week ago that I left. A Los Angeles native never entirely at ease with sunshine, now transplanted to a small rural Michigan township, away from my city and its associations, its culture, its warm and bittersweet recollections. Away from home to where the white people are. A secret: enough bullying in childhood by any one race can leave you distrustful of said race for the rest of your life. This may include family of origin; half of my family could never resist attacking the Jewishness of my father and by extension, myself. I'm never entirely at ease when there's too many white folks around, even as I'm sharply grateful for my own white-bread whiteness, the privilege that allows me to pass among them without comment.

Savoring the winter-stark grays and browns of these rural backroads that are my new neighborhood, it's too soon to tell whether I'll find myself at home here. For now, my contentment is real enough, stomping through iced mud and stubble in my new muck boots, gawking open-mouthed at the sight and sound of massive, migrating Sandhill Cranes. A little alienation rests easy in my bones, built-in from the beginning. I know myself for an outsider, an incomer, a tourist. I can find that familiarity anywhere I go and still draw nourishment from the terrain.

It's almost ten months since I crossed over the threshold whispered by aunts and grandmothers, culmination of the great bodily disruption almost nonexistent to public social history. It begins now to exist in capitalism, as marketers awaken to a generation ready to be mined for their anxieties and discomforts. Mildly self-deprecating sarcasm preserves my amour-propre while I research post-menopausal "personal moisturizer".

Two days ago I passed the semi-alliterative milestone of fifty-five years, the unwished-for 80s schlock-rock of Sammy Hagar looping uninvited around my head and I can only hope it will leave before my next birthday. Staring down the downslope now, and much less afraid of it than I was in my 30s or 40s, or even last year. The list

of things I will not be doing is longer than the list of things I will do. Caring for my mother from her stroke to her death educated me: how infinite the varieties of bodily decline, how pitifully hollow the protestations of chirpy, terrified idiots and their endless panaceas against the unforgivable sin of aging.

The study of post-structuralist and continental philosophy can lead one to suspect that capital-P Progress is an illusion peddled by hucksters with an agenda, soothing us away from poking at social structures we're meant to take for granted as 'natural' or inevitable. I don't plan to 'move on' in my transitions. I'll insist on my stuck-ness, my sorrow, my resentment. Festering and marinating, I would politely invite whatever decaying matter is collecting and fermenting to just... stay awhile. Keep me company. Making a virtue of necessity if the sludge refuses to depart of its own free will. Like the attempt to make friends with one's stubbornest demons: if I'm going to lose the war, let me see what profit I can scrape from the occupation.

Menopause this year. The physical transition occurred without allowing me to leave anything behind. Some transitions don't lighten the baggage at all. More years, more experience, the practical awareness won by mere survival is a squeeze that tightens exhale by exhale; if tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner, how on earth does one displace the massing of compassion that builds year by year? As I drag her across the floor this compassion collects sharp little crusts of regret. Or rather large, indigestible crusts. I gnaw at them but they gnaw right back.

At twenty-eight hours old, I changed hands. There was never a time I didn't know about that transition, and I didn't consciously feel the weight of it in childhood. Only with this elongated history do I look back and suspect its place in the pattern of a Sisyphean dance around self-worth: love is to be earned, is transactional, earned over and over. And so the same obtains for self-worth: a perpetual climbing up the walls of a hole that caves in from time to time. But then, my adoptive mother was raised (if you can call it that) by biological parents and heaven knows struggled far harder and lost more.

The older I get, the more her life comes alive for me. I can't, I won't, let go of my mother's tragedies that also formed me. Hamlet femme, my resentment on her behalf is the impotent vengeance of the filial daughter. Perhaps my rage for her is also rage for me, attempting to navigate the wreckage of her past still living inside me (invisible shoals, electrified barriers, a shock collar implanted under the skin) without an idea of where I should go, let alone a map of the territory. Held by memory, I make artwork to excavate and interrogate this one thing, her life, because nothing else has meaning. Or rather—all meaning is contained for me here, where the brackish tide of all my other meanings continually pulls back, pulls back, pulls back.

Very distant memory tinges itself with gray, details bleeding in and out, washes of ink on thick translucent vellum. Not my earliest memory, surely, but the earliest with a bite this sharp, though blurred and aching like bruised fruit.

We are hurrying along a street in gray dusk, my mother and I. The sidewalk is gray, dry weeds sticking out of the darker lines between sidewalk and curb, taller weeds lining asphalt of almost-black. She is holding my hand. It's cold out, and windy, the hand holding my mother's is cold. I recall no sense of heading toward any brightly-lit warmth of home. But we've been to what I imagined was our favorite shop, the teacher's supply store, my mother has lovingly bought something educational for this daughter who clutches at her right hand. Next, bead in the string of images that hold the metallic turquoise walls and seats of an old city bus, it seemed old even then, a crust of grime on the yellowing vinyl-covered wire strung near the concave ceiling. The oval, steel-framed windows are now nighttime black, lights from outside piercing reflections of the interior. My mother boosts me up to pull the wire and signal our stop. It triggers a hard, nasal, analog buzz, surprisingly loud: a sound that places this moment in the past as decisively as the rounded lines of a bus held over from the late 1950s.

Other moments are associated with these, but I can't be sure of their place in the chronology, whether they're part of this same cold walk in late fall. My father seems far away in this memory, and

I don't know whether this is one of the several times she left him for a while.

Neither surprising nor secret, that with age a memory dims to leave only the afterimage of sensation. What's granted with age is the shifting vision of great distance: to see that she, my mother, was painfully young and fragile with that youth; with age and awful knowledge I know what sorrow has gone into her making, what led her to this dark street, that dark apartment, the cornbread and black-eyed peas she'll make for our dinner. In irrevocable memory I hate the gritty texture of black-eyed peas and refuse to eat them and I can't go back and ask her to make them again, promising I'll eat every last bite.

sophia kiuchi

1. What types of personal experiences influence your work?

The personal experiences that influence my work are ones that leave a strong emotional impression on me. Whether it's the quiet appreciation of being with family, the thumping joy of falling in love, or the dreadful mourning of losing a childhood friend, I believe that being in touch with your emotions and using it to fuel your work is the key that brings the page to life. Since most of my current work is based on music, a lot of my pieces are directly inspired by lyrics or songs that served as a soundtrack to however I was feeling in a particular situation.

2. Describe a time you felt lost during your creative process.

A time when I've felt lost in my creative process was actually right after graduating from school. I was confident in my technique and the voice I had developed in my work, but the imposter syndrome still made its way into my head. Are my skills even in demand? Am I doing enough right now? How do I want my life to look in five years? Will I be able to support myself? Will I be happy doing this? It was an exhausting, confusing, and backwards moment for me—you'd think that you're ready after four years of what's basically an artist's boot camp. I realized the importance of having a third-party perspective in these situations; surrounding yourself with friends and fellow creatives you can trust can be incredibly helpful and empowering. Navigating a dip in the creative process doesn't have to be a solo journey!

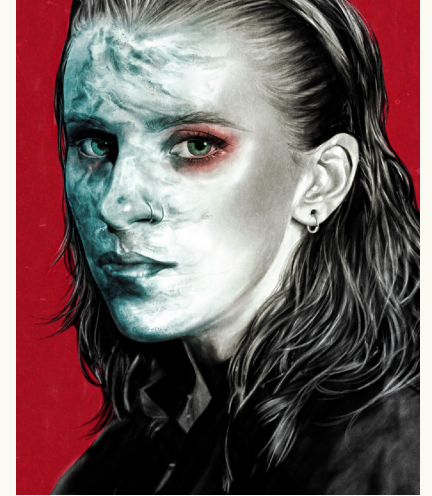


3. How would you define being “successful” as an artist?

I believe that success as an artist boils down to maintaining the spirit to create. Whether that be for a high-stakes brand campaign or a scribbly sketch that will never see the light of day, as long as you find joy in making things that speak to you, you will always be winning. I don't believe success to be a grand ole destination for the artist. Landing a dream gig or selling out a show are certainly moments that deserve recognition and should be celebrated, however, it is what you do with those newfound achievements that really matter, and it's hard to keep going when you lose joy in the process. To quote Winston Churchill, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts.”

4. Have you ever felt like you've failed as an artist? When/why?

This is a scary one to think about. Ironically, fear is an unflinching factor in making me feel like I've failed as an artist (say that five times!).



Letting fear dictate the things I do or and don't create is something that I've always battled with, especially since realizing how dense the world is with talent. The fear of being judged and not being good enough has limited my capacity and openness to create. It's easy to let it cloud your conscience and convince yourself that you don't have what it takes, but I realized that in a creative context, fear is usually just a small hump that takes about 10 seconds to get over. It's become important for me to practice putting that energy into proving myself wrong by at least trying and creating something over nothing. I know this issue isn't unique to me and we'll all experience it in various degrees over time, but as I mentioned in the previous question, failure isn't forever as long as you pick yourself back up in the end.

5. What are you looking forward to this year (art related or not)?

2023 is actually the most unpredictable year I've ever looked forward to considering it's my first full year as a working adult. I definitely feel intimidated, but I also feel a sense of liberation and excitement to test my potential. Some of the intentions I've set so far include: Meeting-up and collaborating with fellow creatives *checks At The Core off the list*, continuing to explore the art culture in LA, and devoting more time to refining my workflow and developing technique!

the whole experience

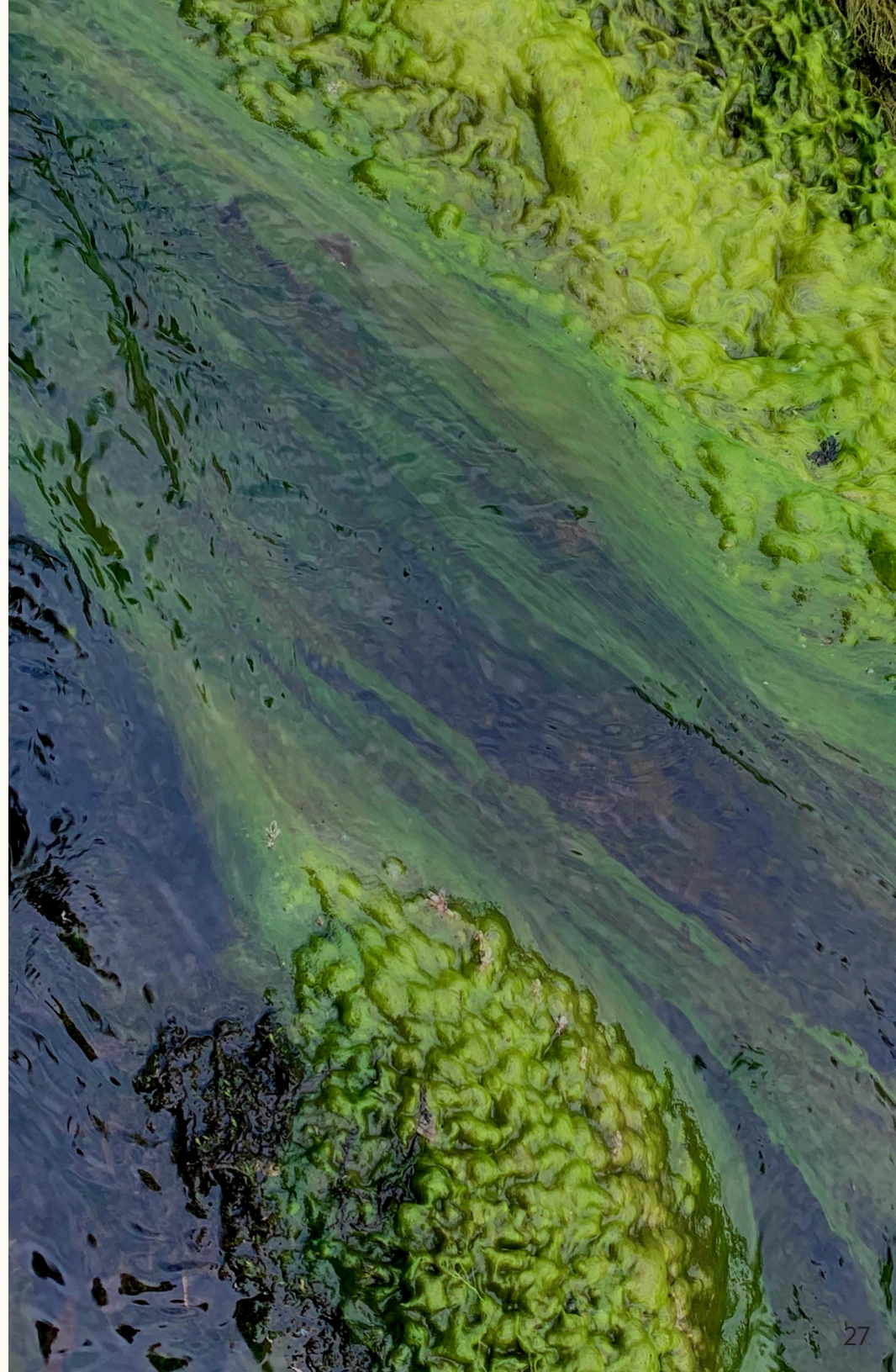
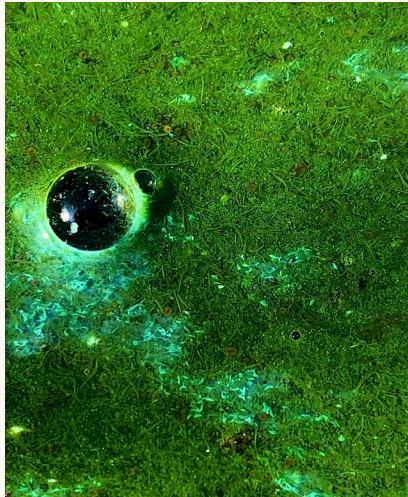
harris kramer

“Spending a summer in a National Park sounds like an awesome experience” I said to myself as I accepted the offer to be a field fellow this summer. I didn’t exactly know what I was getting myself into, but I was ready for a change of pace. This summer has taught me many things, the most important being how to truly experience a place. You could live in a one-room house and not fully experience it without being in the mindset of exploring that space. You must explore the space: feel the softness of the carpet with the occasional grit from sand or a crumb, listen to the humming of your water heater, feel the pain of accidentally stubbing your toe. All these experiences, good and bad, help to build your understanding of place. What is a place if you do not stub your toe from time to time? Like a friend who you’ve never gone through a rough patch with, their

true colors are hidden. You can not know something or somewhere until you’ve experienced both good and bad. I don’t seek out the “bad,” but I know it is always hiding around the corner, and I try to accept it for what it is when it decides to show itself. I’ll admit that I do enjoy a good storm, or the adrenaline of getting soaked by huge waves splashing over the side of the boat during a windy day on the lake. What is usually considered bad seems to bring good along with it. Rain brings mushrooms and color to the forest. I have not figured out what waves and wind bring yet, but I’m sure it is something I haven’t been able to focus on yet. Learning about a place in this way takes time; one summer can offer a lot, but to understand this place fully will likely take a lifetime.

After thinking about my time observing Voyageurs National Park I realized I subconsciously live like this, or at least try my best... Rather than just existing in a place, I try to understand it. This task is impossible to do in one summer, but my time in the field has taught me a lot. I think it is important to feel, smell and see all things I end up running into. I have smelled beaver castor mounds and “bog farts”, I have felt moss that feels like a memory foam mattress and slimy bryozoans, I have seen beautiful algal blooms and rolling storm clouds coming my way, I have spent countless hours in wetlands doing vegetation surveys seeing the fascinating plants on top of the floating mats, and the ugly underside of the mat when I fall through and fill my waders with mud. All these sensations have helped me to get a different experience of Voyageurs National Park.

Decontaminating boats at Kettle Falls helped me realize how I look at experiencing a place in more depth than might be normal. While working decon, you have to pay close attention to the boats that come through the portage. The underside of boats, something that is usually overlooked, became an important part of my day. The algae covered curves of the hull that are usually hidden by the water became a common sight. With this inspiration, and the large amount of idle time I had to think about my time in the park, I began to photographically capture what I saw in Voyageurs National Park. I showcase different perspectives of places, plants, and everything in between that might usually be overlooked. Through focusing on texture and color more than the thing itself, I attempt to show my way of experiencing Voyageurs National Park.





lauren schoolmeesters

1. What types of personal experiences influence your work?

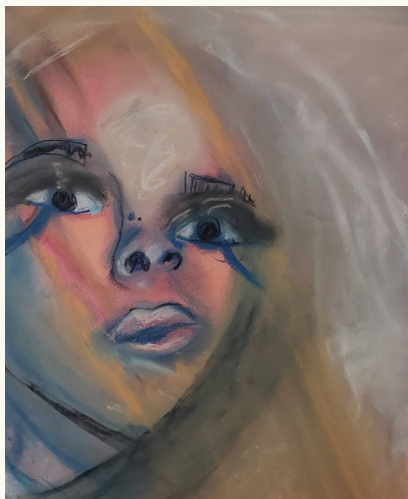
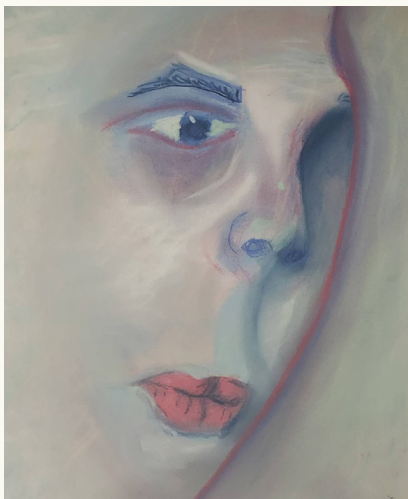
I used to talk about my life a lot more than I do now. I used to live by the words, “If everyone knows everything about you no one can use anything against you.” I’ve found that this statement has aged poorly—However, once more I’ll put my life on blast for the purpose of growth. This particular series was influenced by actually taking notice of a lost and empty feeling I had been harboring for a few years. I was groomed starting at the age of 14 and it wasn’t until seven years later, spring 2021, that I was finally able to get away from this predator. The experience of “belonging” to a pedophile is one that has troubled me deeply. There was a lot of abuse involved outside of it being pedophilic. Everything I did and said basically had to be approved by this man. If it wasn’t I was punished. Because of this, I’ve found it incredibly hard to express myself at times. My art has always been a place to explore existence, both the physical and ephemeral, and is one thing this man could never take from me. So I look at it as a map of who I am and a reminder that I am, in fact, my own person.

2. Describe a time you felt lost during your creative process.

I frequently feel lost when doing self portraits. If I don't recognize myself in the reference image (e.g. if I'm dissociating too hard) then I find it difficult to move forward. I do self portraits as a way of connecting to myself and strengthening my love and trust for myself.

I still feel lost when I look into the pale blue profile of myself in this series. It feels like a creative process unfinished despite having a fully finished portrait in front of me. It's because of the blue. I'm bipolar and during a year-long psychotic episode I got caught in the obsession over the color blue like others before me. One thing that frequently happened during my psychotic episode was a complete dissipation of self. This was deeply reflected in my art and continues to be reflected in this blue portrait. Blue is the color of lost. We get lost in blue eyes, skies, and oceans. I think it is only right that I, too, get lost in it.

Additionally, it is always about a quarter of the way through a drawing where I feel lost as to how this even becomes a face. Or furthermore, how it becomes me. It's that point when everything is simply melded colors—before there's any depth or linework put in. There is so much uncertainty in those moments that I find it overwhelming. Everytime I create it is a journey of losing and finding myself all over again.



3. How would you define being “successful” as an artist?

I frequently mix up what I think it means to be successful career wise with what it means to be successful as an artist. A successful career life is doing art and design on my terms and being able to live comfortably off the pay. However, being successful as an artist is a couple things. First, it is never stopping—it's continuity. The moment I stop creating, I've failed. Second, it is always exploring. My high school art teacher always told us to ask, “What if...” and “Why not?” The moment I stop asking these questions I've failed. Third, always finding an emotion in what I do. The moment my pieces become emotionless, I've failed.



4. Have you ever felt like you've failed as an artist? When/why?

Two weeks before graduating college in Fall of '21 I dropped two of my classes and took the L on the other two. After that, I went on academic break from studying Graphic Design. I had two weeks left and I couldn't do it. I have a million reasons why it didn't end up working out for me—financial struggles from leaving my groomer, battling alcoholism, addiction, and an eating disorder, being in the peak of a year long psychotic episode, and dealing with tremendous heartbreak all while unmedicated and not properly supported. At the time I didn't feel much toward the situation other than relief. It wasn't until I became fully medicated, anti-psychotic and all, that I finally was able to sit down, look at my life, and feel like a failure as a creative and a person. I've always found it twisted that the first symptoms to be addressed when undergoing treatment for bipolar disorders are the ones that bring you the most joy. When all my manic energy was zapped away by my meds and I was capable of thinking clearly, I only had my depressive thoughts and the realization I was weaker than I'd ever imagined. In reality, I'd just escaped a predator within the last year, moved apartments, gotten sober from alcohol, re-fed myself, and somehow was able to finally convince a psychiatrist that I needed to be better medicated—all of this during a psychotic episode during what would have been my last semester of college. I'm not weak nor am I a failure as a creative. Life is hard.

5. What are you looking forward to this year (art related or not)?

As time moves on I find there's more and more to get excited about for the future. In a sense I've hit my rock bottom already and the only way left to go is up. I'm looking forward to the top. I always look forward to growth. Growth takes so much time but I've seen rapid change within the last two years. I look forward to hitting new mile markers frequently when it comes to big things like when I'll get to celebrate 2 years sober from alcohol to little things like exploring new art mediums and subjects and everything in between. For once, I can truly say I am looking forward to living in this new year.

