EVERTHINGSFINE

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EVERYTHINGSFINE

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Introduction

Miles away from anyone else on the broad, flat, open prairie, the sun baked the tall grasses as they undulated in the wind. A strong gust towed a massive, steel-blue storm cell as the temperature plummeted. Gazing upon the impending, ominous hull, its mass seemed endless. My stomach turned and my nerves were frozen as I felt the dark accumulation loom over me. A deep, dull roar emerged from the back of my head and gained volume as the storm cell approached. I began to doubt that my pulse would ever return to normal. I opened my eyes and remembered that I was standing in front of my class but I couldn’t hear anything over the ever-increasing discordance building up in my head.

The point of departure for my thesis exhibition, EVERYTHINGSFINE, began with identifying the main source of my anxiety, tinnitus. Tinnitus is the pervasive sensation of hearing sound when no external sound is present. Although it is an invisible condition, tinnitus has the potential to contribute to depression and anxiety due to sleep deprivation, poor concentration, and social isolation. The effect of tinnitus and anxiety is cyclical; they feed off of one another, drastically diminishing the capacity for rational thought.

While important and significant to me, I chose to distance my general concept from tinnitus in an effort to connect with a larger audience. What is essential in my experience can be true for others. The absurdity of anxiety and depression and mood disorders has on our society as a whole and the trepidation that surrounds the topic of mental health is unnecessarily stigmatized. I materialized depression and anxiety to contend with their impalpability. With the

simultaneous acknowledgement of the absurdity of physically attending to matters with no
corporeality and the reality that there is no true control over these psychological states, weather
was my metaphor of choice. I compared my experience of tinnitus and anxiety to clouds
gaining mass and condensation. Contrary to popular belief, clouds are not fluffy, weightless
apparitions, rather the average cloud weighs about a million pounds. Much like the burden of
anxiety, the cloud metaphor held both physical and psychological weight; anxiety may not
possess physical mass nor can it be measured by quantifiable means, but its burden is surely
felt.

Theory and Historical Context

The sublime has been defined in a myriad ways in the past several centuries in western
civilization. Definitions of the sublime have drastically changed in the last two decades, with
such variations as the techno-sublime and ‘the eco-sublime to the Gothic sublime and the
suburban sublime. Most contemporary sublime iterations can be linked to the philosophies of
Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke. Immanuel Kant created two sub-definitions of the
sublime, the mathematical and the dynamical sublime. Kant’s mathematical sublime is when
one’s ability to comprehend quantifiable measurement is completely overwhelmed. The
dynamical sublime is when one’s capacity or will to resist against natural forces is
overwhelmed. Edmund Burke’s sublime is the simultaneous sensation of terror and awe upon
confronting powerful and threatening forces of nature. First, the sublime experience

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2US Department of Commerce, NOAA, National Weather Service. "NWS Western Region
 e-r1108499#fn_1_1.
overwhelms both the mind and the body. For this reason, I chose to use the Burkian sublime as a metaphor for anxiety and depression. The essence of these psychological states is that they exist in the mind, but also affect the body. These conditions spread infinitely inward in every direction. I’ve chosen to work specifically in response to Edmund Burke’s definition of the sublime in *The Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas as of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. This is not to say that the sensation of tinnitus, anxiety or depression are pleasurable, yet the extent to which these intangible forces affect one’s well-being is awe-inducing.

Poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire stated, “Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling.” The Romantic landscape painters of the mid to late 19th century focused primarily on the sublime facets of nature; the uncontrollable power, its temperamental behavior and the potential for disaster. Caspar David Friedrich (Figure 1) and JMW Turner (Figure 2) are lauded yet today for their mastery in depicting both nature’s delightful beauty and terror. Similarities of imagery and the conflict of “man versus nature” exist in both my work and Friedrich and Turner’s paintings. In contrast, my intent is not a literal nor a serious attempt at realism, rather an exaggeration of internal coping strategies.

My definition of the sublime still hinges on the Burkian sublime in the sense that we cannot physically create the sublime, however, I maintain that the sublime can be elicited from internal forces as well as external forces such as nature. In this sense, the sublime is untameable. It is impossible to attempt to tame our inner sublimity in its lack of physicality, yet it is our human compulsion that drives us to attempt to control it.

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Fig. 1) Caspar David Friedrich - Küste bei Mondschein

Fig 2) J.M.W Turner, Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps exhibited 1812
To further the metaphors of weather and the sublime, I also use Burke’s definition of the sublime ironically. A major tenet of Burke’s sublime is that no single object can elicit it; only nature is capable of inducing the sublime experience. My work is not meant to illustrate the sublime or imitate its effects, but rather to reveal the absurdity of our attempts to tame it. The irony lies in the human effort to attempt to create the sublime in nature’s image. Operating primarily on the part of Burke’s sublime that maintains that because it paralyzes and overwhims the mind, the terror caused by the sublime is similar to the experience of physical pain,⁶ the experience of anxiety and depression are similarly debilitating. I find absurdity in efforts to control anxiety and depression, yet the desire for self-preservation persists. The sublime is capable of terror beyond human comprehension. Similarly, depression and anxiety are met with social and cultural rejection because of a lack of comprehension of their concrete effects.

Real clouds need no assistance staying afloat. In contrast, the clouds in my light cloud installation are suspended by beams, pulleys, and ropes held tight by hands fixed to walls. The desired perception of the installation is that we experience only on the illusion of control over forces greater than ourselves. To have a sublime experience of nature, one must feel simultaneous terror and pleasure evoked by the wonder before them. Whether it is to imagine teetering at the edge of the Grand Canyon or being swept away by a storm at sea, there is a morbid curiosity associated with the natural, Burkian sublime. To witness the formation and power of a tornado is to be awestruck by its indiscriminate path of wreckage. *(Figure 3.1)* The steel wool tornado installation is a metaphor for anger, diminished by its own irrational

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Anger is an emotional response to fear and pain. It is the most volatile and difficult emotion to control. A major dysfunction of anger is that we feel entitled to it, no
matter the arbitrariness of its cause.

The light bulb cloud installation implies the image of a cloud reaching its point of precipitation. *(Figure 4)* The sublime experience is further complicated from terror and delight to catharsis as the cloud can no longer hold on to its water. The form of the cloud is wedge-shaped, building to an accumulation to overwhelm the viewer. The fallen and broken light bulbs are evidence of the inevitable instability and potential danger.

**Light Clouds: Material, Process, & Contemporary Influences**

I tend to use materials both sincerely and ironically as it suits my concepts. A majority of my material decisions consider tactility and context. The light clouds are made of a soft, fluffy polyester batting that is most often found in pillows. The batting allows light to pass through it diffusely, creating an illusion of cloud-like texture. *(Figure 5)* The concept of this work is an attempt at controlling anxiety, the irony is that the inviting, comforting material is being used to represent discomfort. On the inside, however, are armatures of abrasive chicken wire with jagged edges. An absurd facet of anxiety is that the afflicted person knows on a rational level that they should be at ease but discomfort persists regardless of exterior circumstances. The light that passes through the material, as beautiful as it appears, is indicative of anxious energy often felt as a panic attack. The beams, pulleys and ropes refer to the hyperbolic drama of will or control the emotions. The cast metal hands’ function is to hold the clouds up. *(Figure 6.1)* The hands are made of a permanent material, yet, they appear flawed and gestural in a non-verbal plea for intervention. *(Figure 6.2)*
Fig. 6.1) detail from Light Clouds

Fig. 6.2) detail from Light Clouds
The first work I created in the EVERYTHINGSFINE series were the light clouds. Clouds lend corporeality to the intangible sensation of anxiety. I have mainly worked with installation during my time in graduate school for the advantage of manipulating space in order to have a greater response from viewers. Since the effects of anxiety and depression are a shift in the perception of reality, manipulating space through materials and light connects directly to how installations function. Working in this manner allows me to control how viewers might enter the space to elicit further investigation. For instance, the light cloud installation is positioned in a corner at an awkward distance from the floor. (Figure 7) It confronts and at once obstructs the viewer’s path to the space behind it, yet it also begs to be explored by providing narrow passages between the wall and among the clouds. The decisions about space parallel the unease and discontent corresponding to the sensation of anxiety.

Fig.7) Light Cloud Installation, photo credit: Todd Goodrich

JeeYoung Lee’s installations constructed for her photo series “Stage of Mind” demonstrates a similar materialization of psychological states in space in comparison with my
work. Lee created several impermanent installations in her small studio for the intent of a photographic series with a diminished need for digital manipulation. Each installation was inspired by her memories, dreams, and psyche. Lee refers to her work as “a re-creation of my mental landscape.” I connect to Lee’s work conceptually and visually through her use of material, space, and manifestation of psychological states. Her installation image, “Little Match Girl,” (Figure 8) reveals a similar use of material and form as she also uses polyester batting to create cloud forms. Lee’s series of photographs also underscores joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure, the four basic emotions according to Korean culture. (Figure 9) Lee stated that her intent with her work is “to induce an ironic state of both hope and despair.”

Fig. 8) Little Match Girl, Jeeyoung Lee

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Steel Wool Tornado: Material, Process, Contemporary Influences

I personify materials to connect them with psychological content. Steel wool, for example, exudes both a sense of physical discomfort and a desire to be touched. It is volatile in the right conditions, such as a spark of electricity or flame. The more steel wool is disturbed and manipulated, the more it sheds and imbeds itself into its surroundings. (*Figure 10*) Both the abrasive texture and visual similarity to a static television screen, for me steel wool is the material equivalent of tinnitus.

*Fig. 10* Steel Wool Tornado
Space dictates rules about the way in which I create work. I have to be able to move the work by myself and it must fit through a standard door. I usually build my work in a manner that I can handle independently. By creating steel armatures and fleshing out cloud forms with chicken wire that are light-weight, I am able to maintain autonomy over my process. Using pulleys began as a necessity in my studio so that I could manage to build large work in a small space with no need for assistance.

The steel wool tornado was partially built prior to its installation in the Gallery of Visual Arts. I am attracted to strange spaces, like corners, weird ducts, columns, and places of passage. In order to maintain a sense of adaptability and sensitivity, I created most of this installation on-site. The concept of the steel wool tornado was mostly a response to the material. Working with the material literally made me angry, a reaction that is admittedly absurd. Using steel wool in mass quantity resulted in it embedding into everything. Psychological overstimulation and the oversimplification of rerouting fear often result in anger. Not only does the physical sensation of steel wool, but also its physical appearance lends itself well to the hyperbole of anger.

I gravitate towards contemporary artists who also manifest psychological states through material and metaphor. I am inspired by the cutting wit and dark humor Jana Sterbak wields in her work. I Want You to Feel the Way I Do... (The Dress) (1984-85) is aggressively unapologetic in its declaration of hyperbolic angst. (Figure 11) The work consists of a dress constructed of wire mesh that is electrified and adjacent to a projection of the following text:

I want you to feel the way I do: There's barbed wire wrapped all around my head and my skin grates on my flesh from the inside. How can you be so comfortable only 5" to the left of me? I don't want to hear myself think, feel myself move. It's not that I want
to be numb, I want to slip under your skin: I will listen for the sound you hear, feed on your thoughts, wear your clothes. Now I have your attitude and you're not comfortable anymore. Making them yours you relieved me of my opinions, habits, impulses. I should be grateful but instead... you're beginning to irritate me: I am not going to live with myself inside your body, and I would rather practice being new on someone else.⁹

Fig 11) Jana Sterbak, *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do... (The Dress)* (1984-85)

**Light Bulb Cloud: Material, Process, Contemporary Influences**

The light bulb cloud installed in the central hall of the Gallery of Visual Arts seems more placid in comparison to the steel wool tornado. (*Figure 12*) The work is comprised of steel, chicken wire, copper wire, fish hooks, and several hundred burnt out light bulbs. The chicken wire and steel frame are unapologetically exposed, revealing every connection and

undulation of the cloud form. Precipitation is represented by hundreds of bulbs hanging from copper wire and fish hooks, some bulbs lie broken on the floor, indicating inevitable failure. The bulbs are not lit up and nor can they be; the copper wire suggests evidence of electricity and energy. Incandescence is synonymous with passion and fervor, the antithesis of apathy and listlessness. Andrew Solomon, a writer and lecturer on psychology, politics and the arts described depression as, “not sadness, but a lack of vitality.”

The light bulb cloud installation in the hall of the Gallery of Visual Arts was made to fit the space. To be certain that I could both move it myself and through a door, I welded the structure in three separate sections that were individually more manageable. Using a similar forming method as the light clouds, I covered the steel armature with chicken wire cloud undulations. I organized the bulbs by shape, color, and wire length in an effort to modulate the application of the bulbs on the cloud. Similar to Tara Donovan’s installations, I use household materials or objects en masse to develop naturalistic forms. (Figure 12.1) While Donovan focuses purely on the aesthetic outcome, allowing material to dictate form, I chose materials for their aesthetic qualities and the potential content within those mundane objects.

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Fig. 12) Light Bulb Cloud

Fig 12.1) Tara Donovan, *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)*
The work that unites all three installations in my thesis exhibition is the neon sign EVERYTHINGSFINE. (Figure 13) Neon signage, despite its best efforts, often reads as campy and disingenuous. The neon emits a synthetic yellowish sunshine glow from behind a large cloud as an admission of its false sentiment. The phrase is meant to be read ironically; it’s meant to deflect the question “how are you?” The response, “Everything’s fine” depending on the inflection, generally means that things are quite the opposite of fine and any further discussion would be an exercise in futility. The falsehood of pretending to be well is a practice of artifice.

Another artist whose material and concepts I admire is Louise Bourgeois. Known for her vast array of disciplines and media, Bourgeois’ work centered around childhood trauma and psychological pain.
The subject of pain is the business I am in. To give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering ... The Cells represent different types of pain: the physical, the emotional and psychological, and the mental and intellectual. When does the emotional become physical? When does the physical become emotional: It’s a circle going around and around. Pain can begin at any point and turn in any direction. 

Bourgeois’ Cells, a series of installation spaces that deal with an array of emotions. (Figure 14) Created over a span of two decades, the Cell series presents individual microcosms: each Cell is an enclosure that separates the internal world from the external world. In these unique spaces, the artist composes found objects, clothes, fabric, furniture and distinctive sculptures into emotionally charged, theatrical sets. For Bourgeois, the term had many connotations, referencing both the biological cell of a living organism and the isolation of a prison or monastic cell. The Cells refer to individuals and past experiences. For instance the needles, thread and spindles incorporated in the Cells allude to the artist’s childhood and her parents’ work. The Cells also tell of abandonment, betrayal and loss. 

Light plays an essential part in the exhibition as a whole. The light bulb cloud itself lacks light yet it refracted and reflected the light in the surrounding environment. The steel wool tornado was dramatically lit with orange and blue light creating a murky color field on the work and the space surrounding it. The light clouds emitted an unnatural, intense glow that bled into the area around it, altering one’s perception of space. I used light to exaggerate the unreal and disquieting psychological response to stress. James Turrell’s Skyspace (Figure 15) utilizes light in a similar immersive manner. Turrell uses LEDs similar to the ones in the Light Clouds. Skyspace juxtaposes artificial light with natural light in a reverent space designed to

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12 Ibid.
urge viewers to look up at the sky. *Skyspace* is the most emotionally evocative in the waning evening light. As the LEDs slowly change the color of the interior, the perfectly circular opening above causes the contrasting natural sky’s color to be questioned.

Fig. 14) Louise Bourgeois, *Spider*

Fig. 15) James Turrell, *Skyspace (at the Valley of the Moon)*
Conclusion

Anxiety often coexists with depression and both share the ability to alter one's perception of reality. Depression is not necessarily sadness but a loss of energy or vitality. Much in the manner in which people watch adverse weather with a sense of morbid curiosity, one is at the mercy of these hyperbolic psychological states.

Disarming discomfort through irony, material, and absurdity is at the center of my practice. I chose to describe my efforts of coping through installation instead of objects because I desire to create an immersive experience for viewers. This exhibition is my will to diminish the seemingly indelible stigma associated with mood disorders. Using a broadly recognized metaphor as weather allows me to reveal the silent yet ubiquitous nature that so many who suffer from anxiety and depression try to hide.


Edmund Burke, Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas as of the Sublime and the Beautiful, ed. J.T. Boulton (New York, 1958), 57


