



***SELF AND SCULPTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS: COPING, BURNOUT,
RESTORATION, DIS/INTEGRATED, DIS/COMFORT, CONTAINMENT,
AND SURVIVING DURING THE 2020 PANDEMIC***

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Abstract

This visual essay explores how one individual with mental health disorders navigated the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the Coronavirus pandemic during the summer of 2020. Using feminist disability studies as a form of inquiry, the author applies a combination of visual and narrative arts-based methods to explore various coping strategies employed during the shelter-in-place mandate. Throughout this essay, the author describes the creative process and subsequent transformations that occurred while working through feelings of loneliness, guilt, fear, helplessness, aimlessness, anger, disappointment, and most prominently the feeling of being trapped. This essay concludes with recognition of the artistic process that informs the product, finding value in both, while simultaneously encouraging individuals to explore this type of self-reflective creative practice.



Figure 1. Coping (2020). Alexandra Allen. Mixed Media (Glass, string lights, plastic, barbed wire, twine, raw cotton). 36" x 24" x 12"

When news of the pandemic began to infiltrate the collective conscious of people throughout the world, and especially in the United States where I reside, it brought with it a multitude of unexpected reactions; some fear-mongered, others stayed firmly rooted in denial. When quarantine began, the responses were even more divisive. My hope, along with many others, was that this would pass quickly, that we would go back to some semblance of normalcy within a few weeks and all would be as it was.

I use art and reflexive journaling as a way to think through and alongside complex and entangled notions of identity, particularly that of disability/mad identity. Being bipolar, I always try to keep a watchful eye on my mental and emotional state, lest a manic or depressive episode unwittingly sneaks up on me. Garland-Thompson (2002) claims, “the disability system functions to preserve and validate such privileged designations as *beautiful, healthy, normal, fit, competent, intelligent*—all of which provide cultural capital to those who can claim such status, who can reside within these subject positions” (pp. 17-18). Throughout the course of the summer, as I clung tightly to the swinging pendulum that was my temperament, I found myself losing grip with each of these privileged designations. Due to the tumultuous nature of the pandemic, I had unknowingly embodied a crisis mentality without acknowledging the effect that sustained anxiety would have on my own mental well-being. I was experiencing a constant state of unrest and doubt coupled with a heightened awareness of being unprepared. On a macro level, I was not prepared for a global pandemic. On a micro level, I was not prepared for my greatest fear of *solitary confinement*.

At first, I tried to occupy my time with healthy habits and hobbies, but eventually the distractions that I had created for myself were not enough, and I started searching for ways to cope, to numb, to disengage. The most common methods, at least in my immediate circle, were drinking alcohol, sleeping, and video streaming services. In some ways, a combination of these would work for a short amount of time, but only compounded the feeling of futility that was laced in every action and inaction. In a literal sense, these coping strategies could be tied to material things, which I would later use to create a mobile sculpture. I wanted to sculpt my feelings of dis/comfort while also examining the thin line between self-preservation and self-isolation.

For the core of my sculpture, created throughout the coronavirus summer of 2020, I needed something that referenced my attempts to cope through inebriation. I chose the sturdy form of a glass rum bottle on which I would construct the rest of my piece. What other materials did I have around the house that embodied the idea of quarantine? For the majority of my time at home, I ordered nearly everything I needed online, including groceries. A surplus would not come close to describing the amount of plastic that had infiltrated my cupboard. This would insulate the core of my piece and reiterate the idea of excess and convenience as it relates to ‘creature comforts’. I had, at this point, what appeared to be a wad of plastic, with little character. What else have I depended on so vehemently to generate a disconnection?

I use a lot of blue in my artwork. I’m not sure if it is because I find it calming or if several years of studying art history has ingrained in my subconscious that blue equals sadness. In addition to these common meanings, however, blue had become more significant here because it represented the idea of blue light. Computer screens, TV’s and smartphones—all the things that disrupted a state of mindfulness and created an easy distraction. My little pile of plastic, like myself, needed to be revitalized, so I ordered online some tiny blue string lights that I wove in and out of my bundle of repurposed rubbish. If we think about art being an extension of self, this piece began to not only embody coping and creature comforts, but also my own embodiment of disorder. In thinking about coping, what better way to disengage from the chaos of reality than to press pause. Sometimes, when I feel so overwhelmed that I can’t complete basic tasks, I swaddle myself in a cozy blanket and I take a quick nap. I refer to this affectionately as “hitting the reset button.” What then could exude the notion of comfort more than shrouding this plastic form in soft, malleable cotton. I begin to glue on these tufts of cotton over the surface, making sure that the blue light would still continue to emanate through.

I am a firm believer that sometimes mishaps can have a more significant meaning. If we take the time to dissect misfortunes and look beyond the apparent, sometimes we can discover the absurdity of it all. In the process of art making, I accidentally left the lights on in my now-cloud-like sculpture. Inevitably, this led the light bulbs to burn out. Ironically, I too felt burnt out. The things I depended

on as a distraction no longer entertained me. My work-life balance was in total disarray, and I found myself overwhelmed with academic responsibilities while simultaneously underwhelmed with the recreational projects I used to occupy my time. My only solution, both for my sculpture and in life, was to dissect and repair. I sliced it open and began removing the parts that weren't working (Figure 2), and then I stitched it back together with butchers' twine, being sure to distinguish the restoration as a way to acknowledge the evolution of this creative process. (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Burnout (2020). Alexandra Allen. Mixed Media. 36" x 24" x 12"

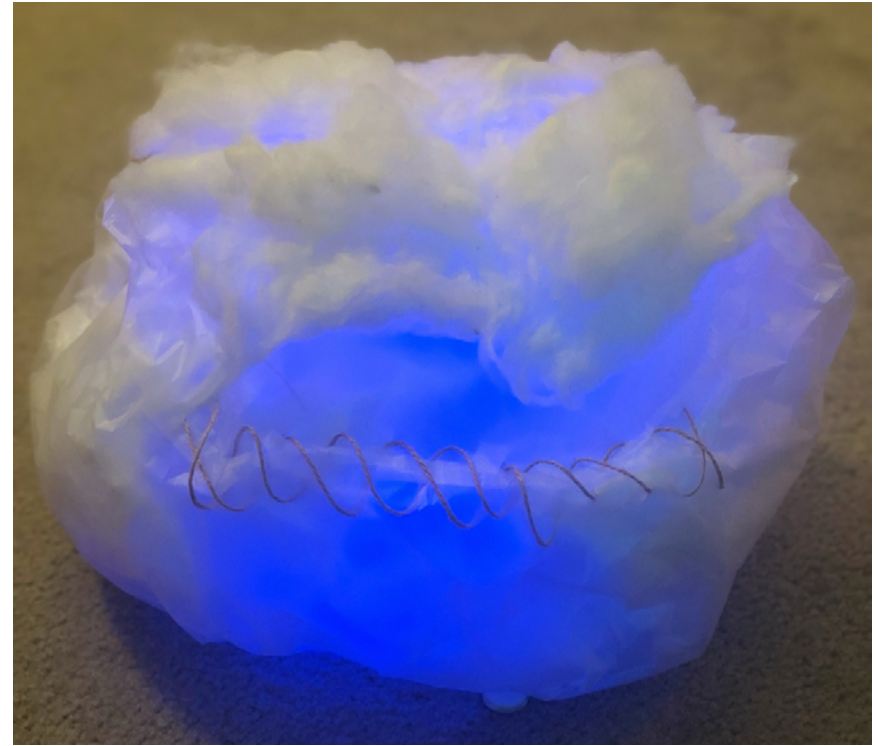


Figure 3. Restoration (2020). Alexandra Allen. Mixed Media. 36" x 24" x 12"

As I continued to layer cotton over my artwork, I couldn't help but notice how clean it looked. Too clean. The process of coping is inherently messy and, in some ways, virulent. Still internalizing the concept of burnout, I began to think about what it would mean to allow something to completely burn-out, that is, to go from a flourishing fire, to an ember, only to become a pile of soot. Something about the connection between burn-out and the process of burning struck a chord with me. The idea of catching something ablaze, whether intentionally or otherwise, and then the panic that sets in when one tries to extinguish a ravenous flame felt appropriate. This led to the most obvious conclusion: I needed to repeatedly set tufts of cotton on fire and smother them when they began to disintegrate (Figure 4). My cloud had become a burnt marshmallow, crisping on the edges from sustained exposure to anxieties associated with the Coronavirus that was spreading rampant like wildfire across the nation (Figure 5).



Figure 4. *Dis/Integrated* (2020). Alexandra Allen. Mixed Media. 36" x 24" x 12"



Figure 5. *Dis/comfort* (2020). Alexandra Allen. Mixed Media. 36" x 24" x 12"

At this point, my sculpture was beginning to embody the idea of dis/comfort, but I felt that there needed to be another element—one that would represent the inner turmoil of maintaining physical distance without relinquishing social ties. I had a curious thought about the things we use to keep us safe. Personal protective equipment became a commonly used phrase, and masks were mandated not only because it shielded you from the virus, but it also mitigated transmission to others. It is the socially responsible thing to do. When using these methods in conjunction with physical distancing, the focus was to be proactive and protective, and I began to question where the line is drawn between keeping others out and barricading ourselves in. Barbed wire is a tool that can be used for both. When thinking about prison compounds, barbed wire is used to keep inmates from escaping. However, when used to line a hen house, its purpose is largely to keep invaders out. Was I, at this point in isolation, also doing both? I felt it imperative that this piece, as one final addition, be wrapped in barbed wire, as if to nod to this notion of safety, seclusion, and the precarity of the two (Figure 6).

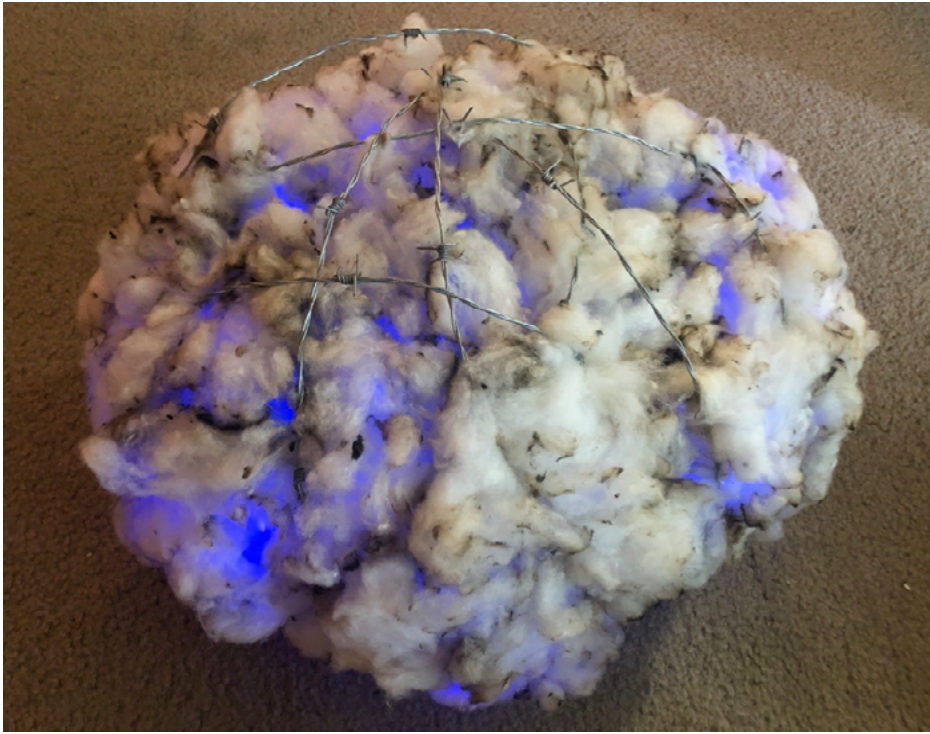


Figure 6. Containment (2020). Alexandra Allen. Mixed Media. 36" x 24" x 12"

Figure 7. Surviving (2020). Alexandra Allen. Mixed Media. 36" x 24" x 12"

Though this sculpture has many elements that interrelate the material with the conceptual through metaphor, it doesn't necessarily come through in appearance alone. I find that this piece speaks loudest when it is encompassed in complete darkness, which in many ways feels equally appropriate (Figure 7). The nuance may be lost in the creative process, but the relevance of the subject of coping can be understood by others, with or without experiencing the shared trauma of living through a pandemic. In the most literal sense, the process of creating while interrogating these thoughts and emotions was in itself, a coping mechanism. Although these experiences may not be relatable for everyone, I do hope that others find the value of creating as a way to understand challenging times, and I encourage individuals to explore these methods as a useful form of self-reflective practice.

Reference

Garland-Thomson, R. (2002). Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory. *NWSA Journal*, 14(3), 1-32.

About the Author

Alexandra Allen is a Post-Doctoral Scholar of Art Education in the School of Visual Arts at the Pennsylvania State University. With a PhD in Art Education from Florida State University, her research focuses primarily on individuals with disabilities and how they develop and renegotiate their own disability identity. Using theories from disability studies, Alexandra continues to generate sculptural works that address issues of ableism in an effort to challenge the stigmatized notion of mental health disorders within a normative society. In her most recent work as a practicing artist, Alexandra's creations are largely in abstract form, combining various methods including paper, wire, watercolor and ink to encapsulate her own disability experience as she explores the sociocultural factors that perpetuate performative ablebodiedness. Allen can be reached at Aka5923@psu.edu

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