Traces of love and revulsion

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Spring 2014
Abstract

Through this thesis I explore the tension between two kinds of objects, or experiences; positive, joy-evoking ones, and negative ones such as repulsive or disgusting items.

From a curiosity about how visual and tactile effects can be the exact same within two objects, but evoke the opposing physical reactions of repulsion or attraction, I explore the ambiguous, uncanny experience that occur when these conflicting experiences merge together.

In my practical work I investigate the concept of skin and animation in the process of creating a sculpture, through materials like latex, fabrics and metal. I look at how working with materials and shapes that appeal strongly to sensation and that resemble body can be a vocabulary to read emotion into a work.

I investigate different ways that artwork can express a dark topic and the role of empathy within artwork resembling incomplete bodies, and draw parallels between our experience of the merging of positive- and negatively charged objects, and an emotional experience; how the human body can fit both drives of violence and love simultaneously.
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A prologue

I embrace the bleeding void groaning inside of my chest, my black intestines crawling, as they believe my lies, my lying body. I cant help to think this darkness somehow radiates, is able to seep through the camouflage of my pale skin, my soft words.

What would it look like, extracting this invisible horror, revealing the disconnection between surface and core? Stretching a tired camouflage until it reveals the secret of the subsurface.

In this emotions potential power, its force of destruction, would traces of beauty linger? Traces of the careful nourishing that took place for this engulfing darkness to grow strong in the soil of a mind.

Contorted and torn in the restrain of conflict, in being destruction and solution merged in painful shape. Appealing to affection as much as to revulsion. Desperately repressed and hidden. Secretly loved.
Meeting toys and monsters

The way materials or objects can evoke particular feelings and how this is manipulated in the objects we surround ourselves with is something that fascinates me. Like most girls I played with Barbie dolls and My Little Pony toys as well as having a lot of plush animals while growing up. These objects were animated, through play, with an extreme positive energy, as a manifestation of all good qualities one can imagine, and fantasies of what oneself would like to be. Enhancing this, or guiding this animation, is the aesthetic of the toy. The bright colors, glitter, shine and beautiful hair of the Barbie and Pony toys, and the soft, tactile, friendly faced, huggable plush toys, all smiling and inviting positive qualities to be applied.

Alongside my joyful toys, as a kid I watched many horror movies under parental reassurance that “The blood is only ketchup”. Although not reflecting on this at the time, this experience changed my perception toward my toys. It made me understand something about how the aesthetic of my toys manipulated the thoughts I applied to them. Especially the horror comedy movie Critters made an impact as the monsters starring in this movie in many ways look like plush animals gone bad. The small furry monsters have you changing from empathizing with the strange cuteness of them to being horrified by their sharp teeth and evil minds when performing bestial actions.

The tension, or conflict of association, that these experiences provoke is something that stubbornly follows my work, and manifests visually in my projects. My main medium has for years been within textiles and textile techniques, working with sculptural shapes that explore this ambiguity. I approach the theme through investigating how materials and shapes can be manipulated to evoke strong feelings of attraction and disgust. And how a merging of these opposing qualities evokes strongly sensual and contrasting associations similar to those in the Critters monsters.

Strongly sensual surfaces like shiny brightly colored or plush ones found in toys, or the shine of the pastel blue and reds of flesh and intestines have something in common in terms of attractive qualities. Although you just as easily could categorize only toys as attractive and intestines as repulsive rather then attractive, and this would be just as true. To a certain extent I am researching the attractiveness in the repulsive.
As I am digging further into this interest, looking at my surroundings, the pictures and materials of my studio walls and boxes, I find I have been collecting items or phenomena, that evoke strong physical sensation, and specific emotions. I could roughly divide these into lists of positive, joy-evoking ones, and negative ones such as repulsive or disgusting items. In the joy-evoking category I could put things like Glitter Barbie, Care Bear Plush Animal, Shiny Hair Wigs, Sex Toys, Candies and Foods. In the repulsive category I place things like Intestines, Open Wounds, Slimy Hair, Larva, Putrescence and Vomit. The lists derive from some curiosity about the aesthetics of these specific phenomena. These things have been hanging around my studio and occupying my picture folders and thoughts as a lingering inspiration and mystery fueling my project.

It so happens that most everything on the joyful list is artificial or manipulated by man, and everything on the other is from the body or connected to sickness and death. Most the items I collect for the joy evoking list are pink, a color I tend think of as loud and violent, as much as it can be sweet and joyful. The repulsive list I connect to darkness, things that belong inside the body or grow and develop in dark places.

I find from my lists is that a lot of the joy-evoking phenomena cross over to the opposite side through similar visual and tactile qualities, and vice-versa. So I'm left with opposing physical sensations within phenomena that have almost the exact same visual qualities, like the likeness of vanilla sauce and yellow puss from wounds, the plush of putrescent food or larva and the plush fur of a toy. To make sense of the point that strongly sensual surfaces have something in common in terms of attractive qualities, I have been looking for the attractive appeal within the repulsive things on my list. Intestines can be fascinating, larva and putrescence can be fascinating. I would be interested to see my friend's wound for some reason. Even the slimy hair in the drain would get some curious attention. Vomit turned out to be the hardest, I would like to keep physically away from that. But there are attractive stages for vomit, and one of them is horror movies. Take the projectile vomiting girl in the blockbuster movie *The Exorcist* for example. And horror is a genre where all the repulsive things you can imagine are made attractive. An arena for man-made repulsive phenomena. Objects manipulated for the one purpose of being as fear-enticing and repulsive as possible. And usually you find a phenomenon I would put in the joy-evoking list merged with the repulsive list, like the aforementioned plush-toy/bloody-bug mix of *Critters*. Or the sweet teenage girl merged with a destructive demon you meet in *The Exorcist*. And this mix, this particular manipulation of something safe, joyful, beautiful, merged together with the repulsive, disgusting and dangerous, result in a particular sensory effect of
uneasiness, ambiguity and discomfort. You're left to shift between seeing the beautiful and seeing the disgusting, and shift between feeling the repulsion and the attraction. Here the repulsive is saturated with ambiguity, with lingering uneasy attraction.

These kinds of merged associations are what I investigate in my work. I am interested in what happens when we approach something that has the power to linger in our mind and sensations through the ambiguous feelings it evokes. I see a value in this mysterious sensation that so powerfully speaks through my senses that it makes me reconsider what I see in front of me, and perhaps what I see in myself and other surroundings.
Care Bear Plush Toy  | Candy  | Glitter Barbie Family  | Candy Apple
---|---|---|---
Shiny Hair Wig  | Cotton Candy  | Sex toy  | Pink Fur Fabric
Glitter Barbie  | Strawberry Sauce  | Plush Toy  | My Little Pony Toys
My Little Pony Toy  | Sex Toy  | Shiny Hair Wig  | Shiny Pink Fabric
Growing skin and limbs

Everyday as the tide is retreating I see a large rock covered in seaweed. A rock amongst other rocks of the same qualities, with the same kind of seaweed clinging to it. Still this particular one has me gazing in wonder every time I pass it. There is something lifelike about this rock, and not the others surrounding it. Perhaps a combination of things that make this one stand out, the size of it resembling a body kneeling in the water, hunching under a mane of seaweed. It startles something within me, some recognition, some mystery. A feeling I search for in my creative work, a feeling that distinguishes what inspire me and what drives my project.

Sculptures begin to grow in my studio. I look for a tension, the ambivalence of association that I recognize in the seaweed rock and in horror aesthetics. What attracts me to the seaweed rock, what makes me recognize a body within this particular rock and not the others, is something I cannot fully explain. I imagine skin as I hunt for surfaces for my sculptures. Limbs as the surfaces transform into shapes. I find that the sensual impact of skin, flesh and body, is a particularly strong one and alluring to work with. I think of skin as something that is both protective and restraining, the skin as a membrane that is simultaneously shielding and concealing the subsurface of a being. My material investigation starts with how this idea can be expressed, and how far away from a realistic skin I can manipulate a surface and still have the work register as a skin when you look at it. How much a shape has to look like limbs, like a body, to associate to one.

In my studio I approach this through making samples in a latex material. Latex is a material that fits, combines and collaborates well with textile materials and methods. Its milky liquid state allows me to color and pour it onto a leather surface and have it adapt to the texture of it. It solidifies into a transparent material, flexible enough to be stretched and solid enough to be sewed in. The natural qualities of latex contain both skin and plastic as associations, crossing off my inspirational list on both the artificial and bodily side. I investigate what colors work, in what combinations and with what shapes, underlining fabric and stitching the latex best evoke the ambiguous associations I search for.
To find the wanted combination, the physical sensation that I want the material to evoke, I use my senses actively in the work process. Approaching the material with my senses present, to see if the surfaces are tactile enough for me to have a sensation of them without touching them, to measure my body against its size as it grows. The latex that grow to surface the sculptures are red and pink samples that vary slightly in surface transparency, shine and texture. These evoke an instant association to skinned flesh, coagulated blood and veins. I try to have the surface span between the life like appearance of the red and a violent pink to include associations to the toy and joy-like.

The other textiles I include in my process are all based on my struggle of attraction and reluctance towards them. Fake furs that trough their tactile qualities are extremely attractive, but through their coloring, a black going on lifeless green, and pinks going on loud vulgar rants, make the aesthetics of them fail to project the comfort they as furs are intended to imitate. Similarly vulgar and cheap stretch textiles, of attractive shiny qualities in black and pink, become upholstery fabric for floor panels I think of as serving a cultural setting, a human setting for the sculptures. I think of these panels as what one can encounter in a nightclub or at a bachelors home. I think of them as loveless easy-to-clean surfaces made to inspire some socially accepted moral decline.

Iron rods, the bent remains from the demolishing of a concrete building, attract me because of its solid visual and tactile contrast to the soft latex and textiles of my work. I force the bright metal core to resurface from layers of rust, and keep the irons cramped shape from withstanding demolition. I work from the idea of the textile shapes to grow as flesh onto this metal skeleton, mimicking the composition of a body. From the idea of skin as something both protective and restraining, I look for associations to transparency, strain, and inadequacy in the work. Transparency to what is going on underneath the skin. Associations to metamorphoses, the skins strain to contain a shape in transformation. The inadequacy of both the shape and the skin's struggle, strained in a conflict of healing and destruction, growth and restraint.

I walk by the seaweed rock. I scrape rust. I consult my curious lists. And wonder. I force surfaces together, add fluids and oil, creating skin, hair and intestines. I wait and work towards the moment when I return to the studio and feel like I am no longer piercing a material but the skin of a creature that with helpless patience waited for me to figure out the shape and placement of it limbs and organs.
Liquid latex drying on leather

Fur textiles

Rusty metal

Latex samples, wigs and fabrics
Shape experiments with uncolored latex and pink fabrics
Shape experiments with red latex and dark fur fabrics
Removing rust from iron rods
Shape on metal rod
Tacit knowledge

Things have an internal equivalent in me, they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence.

— Merleau-Ponty

As we seek to understand the world around us, a lot of the knowledge we have about the world is a sensual one that we have physically gathered throughout our lives. This gathering is what enables us to know what a surface feels like without touching it, why we can have the urge to touch a plush teddy bear, and to avoid touching slimy hair in the drain. In *The Tacit Dimension*, Michael Polanyi discusses this type of knowledge. How we everyday encounter wordless communications that we are familiar with, but fail to explain, a knowledge that we can't tell where come from.

As examples of this knowledge he mentions how we can recognize a person's face, without being able to tell exactly what features that made us recognize the face. Further, he points out that within all descriptive sciences great efforts are spent to teach students how to identify diseases, plants, rocks and animals, things that cannot be satisfyingly described through words or pictures. So we all use this kind of knowledge, or language, while at the same time we learn to think that everything can be explained in another.

We can feel the objects around us without touching them, we embody the sensory information. When creating something, a sculpture, a fabric, or furniture, this sensory information is naturally applied to the object. We create something guided by our senses and we can know how the object will be sensed by others around us. The architect and designer Alvar Aalto is particularly sensitive to this notion and aware of his choice-making within this material knowledge. When creating the Paimio Armchair for example he chose plywood rather than steel for the chair's structure, explaining the latter as being psychologically 'not good' for the human being.

As I mentioned, this sensual approach is present in my process as I hunt for a specific physical sensation in my work. And I think my initial interest in textile as a medium is very much connected to this tacit knowledge. Textiles have a profound presence in our lives, having embraced our skin since
birth, a vast physical knowledge about how the cotton shirts and woolen sweaters of our surrounding feel is gathered.

My investigations of the surrounding world, my lists of inspirations, the curious qualities that fuel life into a rock, into artwork, into one specific object and not the similar one beside it is something I connect to the wordless communication of Polanyi. I cannot describe precisely what the outcome of my project will look like, but I know that something in me knows the outcome of it. If this knowledge was not in me, in my hands and my senses, I would not be able to make the specific choices that lead the project forward. Working this way means appealing to the tacit knowledge of those who will encounter my work. I have to believe there is a common ground here, that those who come to view my work bring a physical knowledge that is similar to mine. A knowledge that enables a similar wordless communication to that which I apply when creating the work.
A sense of suffering

Art is one of many gateways that can give the viewer an opportunity to explore himself. 2

Per Inge Bjørlo

Per Inge Bjørlo and Berlind de Bruyckere are artist I keep returning to, that I relate to through their sensual approach to shape and theme. Both work with highly tactile sculptural pieces, addressing themes of suffering and hopelessness. The work applies to us physically, and through the strongly sensory way the works communicate, they relate to the experience of being human, being in a human body. Flesh is painfully present in Berlind de Bruyckere's work. The common shapes of her sculptures are distorted bodies, some human or animal-like with a realistic looking wax skin surface. Others have the shapes of stuffed horse hides, or mergers of human figures with animal bones, or with branches. They all come off as introverted creatures, faceless and crippled in their seemingly incomplete state.

The skin of figures like Marthe looks transparent and hurt, a disfigured human shape who's body branches into twig-like limbs from the neck and shoulders. Its headless, sexless, naked appearance looks uncomfortable and unbalanced in its standing pose. The size of this sculpture can relate to your own body and you naturally sympathize with it. You get a sense of being in the figure's skin when looking at it. But placing yourself in the skin of Marthe seems painful and revolting. Bruyckere's representation of bodies tell us something about being in those bodies through the surface, the superficial qualities that we think might shelter us but that fails as a shield. By surfacing contorted and disrupted bodies with this frail pale skin, Bruyckere enhance a vulnerability in her introvert wounded beings. Her frequent combinations of materials like wood and cloth, materials made to support and comfort, loose these qualities through being broken, coarse to the frail skin, or integrating into the body.

Faceless but bodily sculptures have to communicate through their body as a whole. Somehow this forces me to search beneath the surface when other means of communication are not present. Body language and a tactile language meet in powerful silent expressions that asks to be understood through relating bodily to it.
Figures like *Marthe* and similar deformed bodies in horse hide are displayed on plinths and in cabinets. Through this presentation the sense of them as objects on display is emphasized and an enhanced empathy towards the vulnerability of this objectified body appears, as well as a tension between the perception of them as inanimate or living.

I find her combination of materials particularly interesting. How our perception of vulnerability is enhanced by broken pieces of cloth that no longer serve as protection or comfort, or by coarse wooden benches and tables serving as painful displays for the wounded bodies. I relate to Bruyckere's attention to surface, to details like stitches and her close connection to the material at hand. How her process relates to healing and to pain, as a seam associates to mending wounds, and as the disrupted has a wish to mend and be whole.

I earlier spoke of the curious experience of moral alarms when I poke my sewing needle through a suddenly animate sculpture. Looking at Bruyckere's sculptures I can imagine the same work process, her materials are so loaded with physical associations that working with them without a sensory communication would be close to impossible. Shaping a body like *Marthe*, involves a close contact in shaping and almost caressing a figure resembling the human body. Similarly working with the horse hides, a material that used to be the visual appearance of a living horse, involves mentally carrying these associations while reshaping the material into a contorted but still bodily familiar shape through the close tactile experience of stitching the skin together and grooming the hair.

Per Inge Bjørlo has a more aggressive expression in his work. However, approaching his work evokes a reflection on our feelings rather than what we see. Walking into a room of his work, broken glass and spiked metal alert your senses and steps as you navigate through constructions of dense sharp and heavy materials. Works that look painful, like they can inflict pain on you. Even the softest shapes he offers are seemingly crawling uncomfortable in its own metal or concrete skin.

In installations like *Inner space V, Target*, you are completely surrounded and helpless towards the sensory impact he provokes. In this inner space, you find yourself enclosed by hard thin metal sheets, a cold, sterile impression covering the walls, ceiling and shoulder narrow staircase. The air gets alarmingly warm as you walk up the steps that revile a hallway, or rather, a bright light and a dead end. Here you are easily left with a demoralizing feeling, feeling stuck and painfully aware of your movements as the metal sheets bends and sound under your steps. Everything about this place seems to be made for discomfort, alienation and disconnection.
The pain, suffering and fear he addresses through his work has little if any room for comfort. The hard, cold, sharpened and broken materials of his work are profoundly serious and humorless in their expression. They captures moments of hopelessness, difficult psychological rooms. Still there is a beauty in his composition and surfaces creating an ambivalence between the heavy themes he's addressing and the attractiveness of the surfaces and shapes.

In order to reflect on his work as psychological states, words and mental imagery comes up short. Senses and emotional memory have to be present through imagining the textures of the work onto our own skin. The qualities that attract me to the work simultaneously ask me to stay away. For Bjørlo, art is a way of processing the psychologically difficult. He turns his own internal space inside out, while inviting the audience to meet his work with our own inner rooms. Its curious how meeting these internal spaces, that in material are so far from similar to the human body, evokes the same discomfort and fear as would the sight of actual flesh and blood. I find it interesting how far away from flesh and blood Bjørlo's work is, and how intimately bodily it still is.

Our tacit knowledge forces our body to physically experience the painful and discomforting surfaces of his work. These materials have such a powerful tactile memory in us, that we in our imagination cut ourselves on the spiked metal. Adding to this, the experience meets metaphors we use when emotionally uncomfortable, like a stinging pain of anxiety, or walking on broken glass. In his work the human body is represented through the sensations of his work, the sensation of being human, being in a body.

I could place my artistic aim somewhere between Bjørlo's aggressive approach and Bruyckere's sympathetic. The bodily shapes growing in my studio relate to both artists through visuals and work method. The sensual qualities of the materials, applying to a physical reading of the work is a common ground. These artists express some profoundly serious expression of suffering, either through appealing to sympathy or through sensation. Perhaps I stray off their trail as I try to merge a joy-lavished toy association into my despairing shapes.
Berlinde de Bruyckere, Marthe, 2008
Berlinde de Bruyckere, *K36 (The Black Horse)*, 2003
Per Inge Bjørlo, *Inner space V, Target*, 1990
Per Inge Bjørlo, *Life (KOLS)*, 2008
To enter the subsurface

My evil self is at that door, and I have no power to stop it! 3
Forbidden Planet, 1956

As in Bruyckere's and Bjørlo's work, the tactility of surfaces can be a tool in expressing the sensation of being in a body, and through that begin to express the sensation of a painful mental state. Somehow the sensual approach collaborates well to this purpose, as words often come up short in communicating the vulnerable nature of emotional suffering. The somber and hostile paintings of steep, black waves by Thierry De Cordier, and the massive, powerful sculpture *Belinda* by Roberto Cuoghi, are other works I connect to entering dark mindsets. In common they have an ominous presence, through projecting such a sense of overwhelming power that you're left feeling quite inadequate towards them. The sculpture *Belinda* can relate to Bruyckere's and Bjørlo's work as it strongly applies to our senses through tactility and shape, but what struck me when I viewed this and Cordier's work was the presence of the artists' minds. Through the overwhelming presence the work convey, I find myself being forced to trace the eyes and hands of the artists as the work was made. Follow the artists' hands and thoughts as this monument of a sculpture or these paintings were created.

I don't know why this is exactly. Or why this happens in these work and not the ones by Bruyckere and Bjørlo. Their sensory works argue with shapes closer and more familiar to my own body, shapes I can approach, sympathize with, and fight. In the images by Cordier and Cuoghi I find myself alienated, struggling to find some safe ground. Their overwhelming presence threatens to swallow me whole. A safe ground is not to be found. In the process of looking into the mind of the artist, the works transform into an expression of a state of mind. The state of mind of the artist, keeping to this somber expression, this ominous mindset for the work to become. As this does not seem a good state of mind to be in, and as I cannot truly know the minds of these artists, I am left with my own emotions. I read the piece through my own experiences and through metaphors used to describe mental states. An all-surrounding cold darkness, an overshadowing presence. I apply these emotions to the artists and their work, getting in contact with my own inner world, through the pictures painted, and sculpted, representing theirs.
*The Enclave* is a work I find particularly interesting through its clever way of entering an impossibly horrible topic. Richard Mosse created this multiple-screen film installation and a series of photographs from his exploration of the humanitarian tragedies happening in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The special film that he uses has allowed him to employ a psychedelic palette changing mainly all the vegetation and everything else that is green into screaming loud pink and red colors.

The artificial colors create a surreal but stunningly beautiful visual that contrasts to the reality of the war zone horrors, but also underlines it through the uncomfortable aesthetic of the violent displaced pink. Because of the artificiality of the colors my mind starts questioning if this is staged or not, if it is all reenactments, with mannequins playing the twisted dead bodies. The appearance of this work, the stunning beauty of the landscape photographs I am first introduced to, comes alive in the extreme acts of horror depicted on screens in the other room. My thoughts are suspended between the beauty, the horror and the connection between the two.

This work depicts the destructive and adaptive powers of human beings, painted in an artificial pink that invites me into, and enhances, the surreal violent reality of the world depicted. The intensity of the unlikely colors that attract me to the work change character with the violent content of the movies, with the intensity intact the colors becomes repulsive, a screaming symbol of the horrors displayed. *The Enclave* does not serve to make a difference for the war situation depicted, it is not asking its audience to aid or stop the horrors. However, you are not left indifferent to the situations on screen, but they appeal to a reconsideration of your perception of the world, how you view and are used to view horrifying actions.

What drew my interest to *The Enclave* is the contradicting perception it triggers, being attracted to the unusual beauty of it and then repulsed by the very qualities that made it beautiful. The layer of distance applied by the distorted colors encourages you to dig into a terrifying content at your own pace. Had the content been presented more explicitly one would most likely create a protective mental distance to it, and perhaps not perceive the work's content.

In the movie *Forbidden Planet* the approach towards a dark mindset is eased by the narrative in the familiar wrapping of a move. Here the concept of an inner monster is manifested as a separate being from the character whose subconsciousness is the source of the monster. This allows for the interesting scene where he realizes he is the source of the evil that haunts the planet and finds himself helpless in stopping it. I find this an interesting picture of dealing with the lack of control concerning destructive impulses.
My interest in the artworks mentioned is the distance to the dark topic of their core. Layers of safe
ground, ways of choosing not to see the full potential of the dark topic, is something all these works
have in common. Even if they evoked a lingering art experience within me, I am not surprised that
some might walk unaffected past them. What I like is the choice these works offer, the potential power
in peeling off layers and getting to a core. The monster of the *Forbidden Planet* is quite an interesting
contrast to the usual gore and repulsive effects you find in the common horror movie monster. In
*Forbidden Planet* the monster is as invisible as the subconsciousness it comes form, but its actions
have physical consequences. Unlike a typical horror movie monster that would be something of
extreme repulsive visuals, through effects like blood, slime, twisted body parts and so on. This offers
little safe ground, and parts of the attraction towards a horror movie is to be scared and disgusted.

As my list of inspiration spans between the uncomfortable and the safe, I am working with something
that can weigh in between, offer a choice of what content you see. A common reaction to the latex of
my surfaces is a wonder weather it is real, if it offers safe parts one can lean on to choose the
discomfort away. Safety of a toy aesthetic, a plastic surface, a familiar color. Safety of the inanimate
object.
The incomplete body

Everyone knows how their own body is organized and how many of each part they have. This is a given and is never thought about. To become aware of these particulars, one must imagine oneself unwhole, cut into parts. Deformed or Dead.

Mike Kelley

Many artworks contain elements that provoke physical sensation similar to our nausea reaction to rotten food, to blood and to the sight of someone being wounded. If it is as explicit as the infamous animal slices by Damien Hirst or the disturbingly transforming bodies of Francis Bacon's paintings and Berlinde de Bruyckere's figures, looking at them can evoke such strong physical reactions that they can make the audience turn away at the door.

When we are presented with representations of incomplete bodies, we are reminded of the composition of our own body. Our body is so familiar to us that we never think about the number and organization of limbs until we try to imagine ourselves incomplete. In work like the distorted bodies by Berlinde de Bruyckere, we understand, or feel, the wrongness of the figures through becoming aware of our own living body. As I've discussed in encountering the work Marthe, this awareness, placing yourself in the skin of a bodily disrupted figure gives you an understanding of how this body feels, in a sense what emotions these contortions are charged with.

To experience emotional content in a work it implies an identification with it and a projection of self onto the work. In The Embodied Image, Juhani Pallasmaa discusses the role of empathy when experiencing art. That the artwork receive its power through becoming part of the viewers sense of self. When it comes to the emotional content expressed through incomplete or seemingly tortured bodies, we apply our experiences of physical sensation as well as emotional. The bodily reaction to physical pain is in many ways the same as our reaction to emotional pain, and we use metaphors of physical pains to describe emotional suffering. This makes us interpret artistic representation of a body in pain toward an expression of painful emotion.
The empathic reaction is effective, and hard to ignore, in work that represent body. The sensual reactions toward it can seem almost violent, similar to our physical reactions to stay away from the rotten, the wrong. But the artwork does not cease to be an object, a representation of flesh, and not the real thing. So experiencing emotional content in a work of art is always connected to a shift of perception. As you view one of Bruyckere's bodies you will be aware of the object, the lump of wax that it is, and at the same time be able to experience the emotion of the body, emotion it represents.

Without us empathizing our way into the work, relating it to our own body and mind, the work would be perceived as nothing more than the material it is made of. Our perception shift between the work as simply an object and the emotional and existential meaning of it. The work exists simultaneously in the physical reality and in the imagination. How profound your physical reaction towards a work is, can have to do with how easily the work allows you to the shift of perception of it. If your perception lingers at the painful expression of a fragmented body you might not be comfortable to dwell on the work for a long period of time. But perhaps this is also a discussion of allowing the emotional content to interfere with you. If you are not willing or able to deal with the emotional content it represents, a natural reaction is either deflecting the emotional content and clinging to the emotionless object, or to turn at the sight of the revulsion it causes.

Francis Bacon's paintings might be described as depicting violent scenes of bodies in states of torture and mutilation, but as Deleuze interprets them in Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation, this violence is connected to the violence of our physical reactions. He suggests that Bacon is painting the invisible forces of constraint, discomfort, of sensations. The violence that forces repulsion, vomit or laughter from our bodies. In this view it is not horror that is expressed in the paintings it is empathy for the body. A “pity for the flesh”, that has to withstand this violence. He talks about the bodies of Bacon's imagery as meat, and that meat represents what the living has in common. Suffering and violent sensations is something all living bodies have in common.

In my work I relate to this aim of expressing a certain violence. A violence of emotion, the power of an emotion. The potential force it has to drive a body into destruction, to inflict pain, horror. Representations associative of pained, contorted parts of body become a palette of expressing a mental state, through empathic and sensory reaction.
Francis Bacon, *Three studies for a crucifixion (center panel)*, 1962
Attractive repulsive

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that trusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them.

Julia Kristeva

In my introduction I mentioned a number of inspirational phenomena, listing them as negative vs positive, joy-evoking vs disgusting and repulsive. I must admit I come to a struggle of description as I have already stated there is something attractive within the repulsive even if these are considered antonyms, so I could perhaps more rightfully call this attractive-repulsive and attractive-affectionate. The term abjection can relate to the physical reactions connected to my repulsive list, it literally means "the state of being cast off". In Julia Kristeva's essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror*, she explains the most elementary form of abjection is described as food loathing. The reaction of stomach spasms, heart beat and nausea at the sight of rotten food. Similarly the violent physical reactions to seeing a corpse, or a wound with blood and puss. The wrongness we sense with these objects, and the strong physical reactions we experience because we also identify with them. We have already imagined the food a part of our body, so our body reacts with gagging to save us from the threat of sickness. We have already embodied the cadaver, the wound, and our body objects to the sickness, the death, with nausea and stomach cramps. The abject exists somewhere between the object and the subject. It represents taboo elements of the self.

Something else applying to the combination of my attractive-repulsive and attractive-affectionate, is the idea of the uncanny. The uncanny is explained as creating a cognitive dissonance because of the conflicting nature of being attracted to and repulsed by an object at the same time. Mike Kelley connects the uncanny to the physical sensation of art experiences, and has been investigating the phenomenon through collecting and mapping qualities considered uncanny.
In 2004, Tate Liverpool exhibited an updated version of an exhibition on the theme, originally curated by Mike Kelley. The exhibited artwork includes a substantial number of polychrome figurative sculptures. A human figure crossing a certain line within realistic expression is disturbing, makes us uneasy. Non-art objects of the exhibition were things like anatomical models, stuffed animals, wax figures, as well as images and collections of similar items that evoke the sense of uncanny.

Looking at my inspirational list the attractive-repulsive items on their own, are connected to the abject rather than the uncanny. The mix of them, and the listing itself, connects to uncanny. Having a Sex Toy listed together with an innocent sexless Care Bear gives off something of an uneasy feeling. The list of attractive-repulsive bodily phenomenons gathered together, when in their rightful place in their world they would only come together perhaps in a sewer is, as the sewer as well is, uncanny. An item of either list placed in a context it should not normally be would be considered uncanny. Slimy Hair on the plates in your cupboard or Glitter Barbie in the ashtray.

The artwork by Bruyckere and Bacon can certainly relate to the uncanny, through the uncomfortable representations of body. The other work I have discussed, although evoking uneasiness, they relate more to the uncanny in relation to art experience. Something guided more by subjective experiences and emotions than the general uncanny recipe of attractive and repulsive merged.

I relate to the uncanny as a sensation that I am exploring. A single sheet of my latex skin would be enough to evoke a sensation of the uncanny, or as mentioned, the Glitter Barbie in an ashtray. I am looking for this kind of uneasiness and ambiguity, but at the same time something very specific. The specificity of an emotion perhaps, something of strength and presence, but that falls apart, turns to sand in your hands, if you try to pinpoint it.
Traces of love and revulsion

My aim to merge the joyful with the repulsive, is also a journey of exploring the paradoxical nature of human emotion. In the prologue of this text I try to describe a scenery of the conflict that lingers with destructive actions. The complicated emotions that actions of violence contain. How the human body can fit feelings of love for violence, and find joy within destruction. Trying to find visual points of entry for this conflict, I've looked at how certain surfaces and shapes can evoke strong physical and opposing reactions. The book *The Tacit Dimension* helped me in trying to understand my process of working, as my process is guided by my senses and the material knowledge I feed my hands.

Through works appealing to physical sensation like those by Berlinde de Bruyckere and Per Inge Bjørlo I found that the strong sensual effects of an artwork, the bodily reading of the work, can pull us into our own emotions, our own internal landscape. And comparing these against works less associative to body, like those by Roberto Chuogi and Thierry de Cordier I tried to explore the balance between mental landscapes and physical sensation, and the need of a certain distancing to a dark topic in order to read or experience the torment underlining these works.

I've also looked into the role of empathic reaction when experiencing art, especially within works representing incomplete body. How what looks to be scenes of violence and horror can rather be scenes of internal despair as in the paintings by Francis Bacon. Our reactions to physical pain and to emotional pain are so similar, that when encountering imagery projecting the sensual effect of pain, we can read this as emotional landscapes.

Finally I have looked into Mike Kelleys writing about the uncanny, trying to understand the relation between the repulsive and attractive, and the attraction to the repulsive. I find that the conflicted and hard-to-describe experience of the uncanny can closely relate to the equally conflicted state of emotional torment. Looking for ways to describe how vast, powerful and dark emotions can be contained, restricted, yet nourished underneath ones skin, I want my sculptures appeal to representations of contorted body and skin, and strongly sensual surfaces of conflicting associations. I try to appeal to the very sensations of conflict that the destructive drive is saturated with, and think of the sculptures I create as different expressions of the many sensations that make up an emotional state.
Giving the work a sense of animation has been key in the process, because of animations strong effect of uneasiness and empathy towards it. As the work became bodies, these creatures in turn became metaphors for internal monsters, and I found that when exhibiting the work, because of their animation, a narrative inevitably takes place. In the exhibition arrangement of the work they equal four pieces, two in connection to upholstered panels, and two resting on pillows. The narrow basement space I was given in the exhibition offered to play on the moods of the sculptures as creatures of darkness, creatures highly uncomfortable with being on display. This also makes sense to me as a parallel to the emotional content of the work, what dark emotions one keeps hidden under the surface. I tried to underline this discomfort by having them seemingly trying to escape the space, crawling towards the somber looking backyard on display through the window in the far end of the space. Of the two pieces that can come across as more physically restricted, pinned and frozen to their display pillows, I placed one mid room and one cornered under the staircase, helpless to confrontation.

As I returned to the museum some weeks after the exhibition opening, an unexpected yet not fully surprising development had taken place within the sculptures. The latex skins had suffered in the exposure to hot air and sunlight, resulting in it cracking open on the thinnest most stretched parts of the surface, revealing the furs underlining it. This process could have been prevented to some extent by applying oil to the latex and shielding it from sunlight, but from this accidental effect of deterioration, the visual intention of the sculpture to be bursting out of its own skin is successfully enhanced. Further this effect offers for a potential to reapply layers of latex to them and have this accident reoccur at a future exhibition, giving the sculptures a life and growth I could never have planned for them. The thought of having to keep mending these tormented shapes, these representations of conflicted emotion, gives me the peculiar sense of both comforting and suspending their conflicted existence.
Exhibition view
Exhibition view
Cornered pillow piece

Crawling piece

Crawling piece on floor panels


3 Schary, Dore, and Wilcox, Fred M., Forbidden planet, United States, MGM, 1956.

4 Kelley, Mike, The Uncanny, by Mike Kelley, Artist, Authors and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2004, p. 31.

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