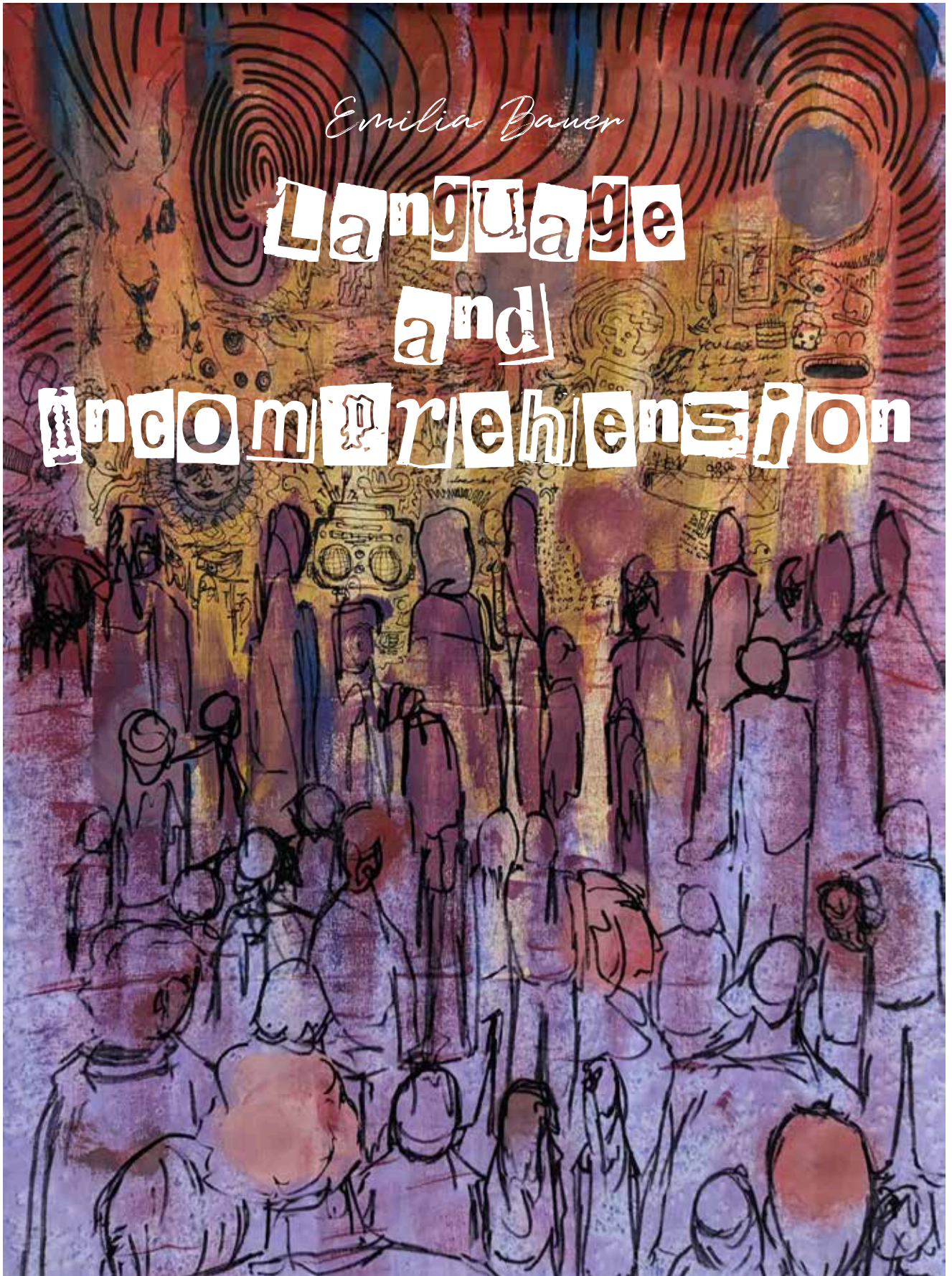


Emilia Bauer

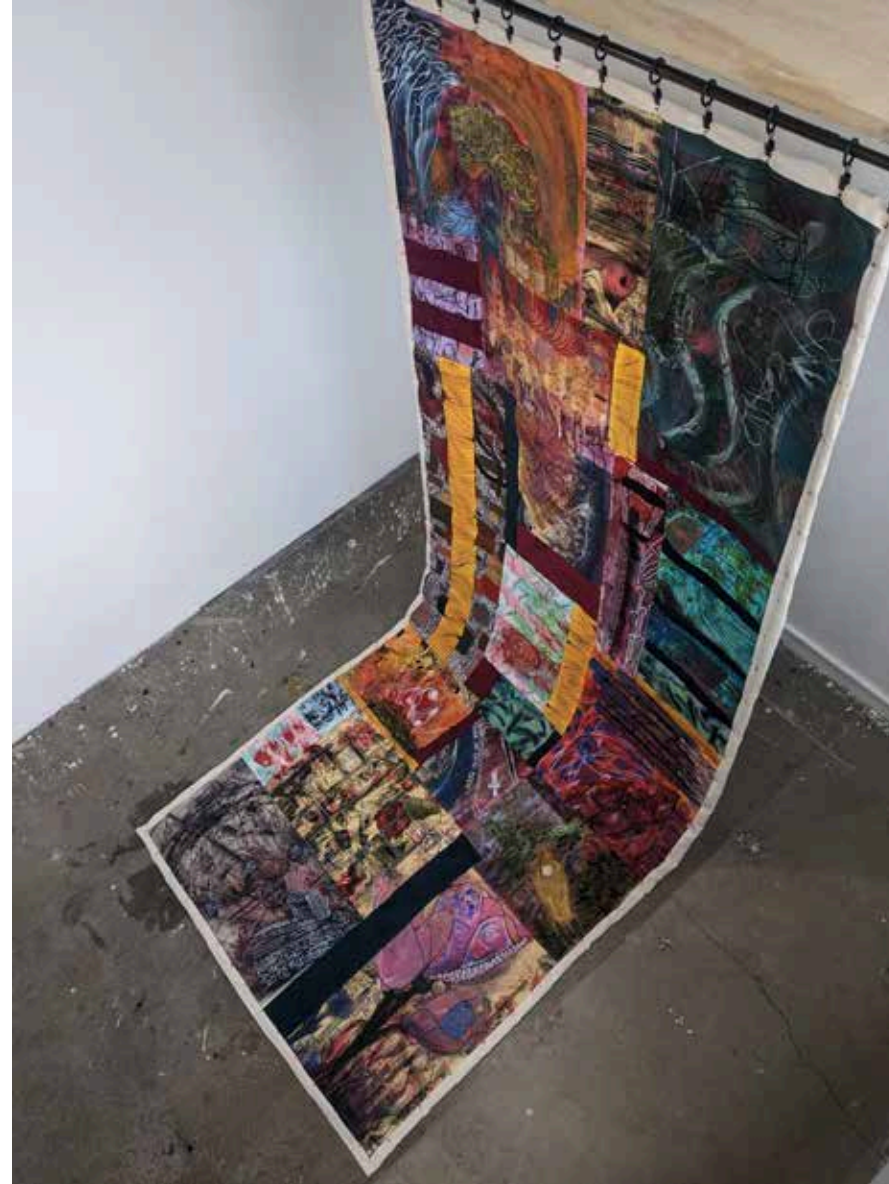
Language and Incomprehension



Artist Statement:

Language and Incomprehension is a quilt pieced primarily with abstract paintings, each reflective of a different conversation I have had. They pull from spoken word, thoughts, memories and energy within the experience to illustrate the larger emotional state present within the process of communication. Quilting's historic implementation in craft and storytelling combined with the element of "piecing" conversations together into one larger whole turns the individual paintings into a self portrait of my mind, complete with nonsense, gibberish, and lots of doodles. Whether the full meaning or imagery behind this work is clear or not, the purpose is not so much to improve interpretation of a conversation but rather explore what might be missing from a purely linguistic expression of thought.

Exhibition:



Research:

Donald Wall's work gave me a good starting point from my central theme of language and communication, but it did not inform me on how to dictate my own work around that same idea. In search for a deeper analysis of communication, I came across Suzanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*. The author explores the thesis that art itself is a symbol/made up of symbols for communication in the same way that typography or written word is. The key takeaway from this body of research was that not only is language really only an incomplete translation of life itself, but that art might be able to communicate even more clearly because it exists in the same abstract space as experience; language is very concrete, each word implied to mean something specific, but of course linguistics are not naturally occurring and thus cannot truly encapsulate the experience of seeing, hearing, touching, etc.

From this revelation I started to work towards a goal of potentially "fixing" the problem of language with the use of visual arts - if language is an inaccurate representation of life because of its nature as man-made, than visual stimuli must be closer and therefore more accurate. A work of art that stood out to me from this point in the research process was Johanna Drucker's *26 '76*:



In her personal writings about this piece, she describes the pages as "paintings" complete with characters, setting, and emotional tone. Her process involved cataloging different "forms" of language present in a conversational experience, listing found language (words seen or overheard in the background), internal monologue, spoken word, etc. What I found most interesting about the work was the aesthetic bareness of each page; logically the language spoken in a conversation would be the only thing needed to illustrate a scene, but the work forces us to contest with the fact that the actual conversation is missing all the most important details.

Research:

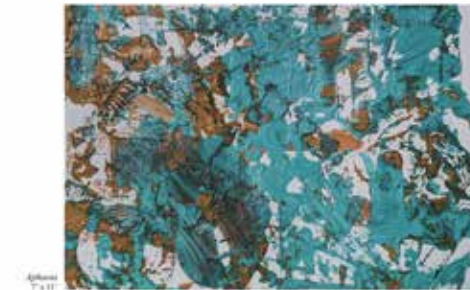
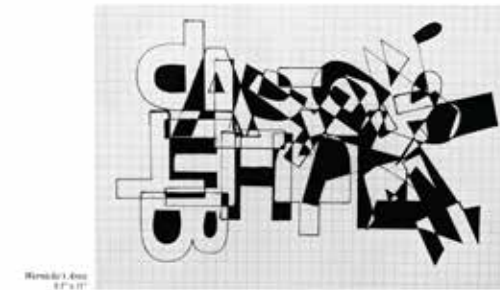


At this point in my research I was still focusing primarily on typographical works, but Drucker's work led me to a different line of questioning: what are we all missing from communication when we rely solely on language, and what would a conversation look like if we were able to use image, sound, or other sensorial experiences?

This led me to artist Jennifer Morla, who makes digital collages out of photography, digital illustration, typography, and pattern. Her work, though not as conceptually tied to communication and language, illustrate what feel like small moments of consciousness - the combination of abstract and hyper-realism lend to the aesthetic of freeform thought, and became the basis for my work's aesthetic direction.

Process:

As per my initial research, my initial idea for practical work was to illustrate the process of communication in the brain using abstract typography - the goal being to articulate to the audience what steps the brain is taking in order to codify life into language.



The goal of these experiments was to find an initial aesthetic direction, but also try different mediums to find one that felt more conceptually significant to communication. A large theme between the individual works was the act of obscuring linguistic meaning through overlapping.

Process:

At this point my work was still loose in terms of what I wanted the final work to actually be, and began looking more deeply into cognitive science research for answers. My working problem statement focused on identifying specific limitations of language in communication (and consequentially how visual arts could mend them), so the neurological steps of linguistic processing seemed like the ideal place to look.

Through research I was able to identify 4 steps of semantic processing titled Socialization, Generalization, Separation, and Subjective Prediction, where their definitions within my body of work are as follows:

- **Socialization:** That language is innate in the brain as a function of social interaction rather than pure survival; this provides the overarching theme that language is inherently man-made, and therefore not objective in nature
- **Generalization:** That language is a code for abstract perceptual stimuli and is thus a generalized version of true experiences
- **Separation:** The cognitive construction and comprehension of language is separated by stimuli-receiving and language-producing cortices; this can create a separation between the objective truth and what is mentally perceived/interpreted
- **Subjective Prediction:** That every experience and learned “truth” is cataloged to adjust our response to every experience after

When I completed this body of interdisciplinary research, I was able to go back to my initial experiments and identify which medium and aesthetic imagery was most successful in expressing each limitation.

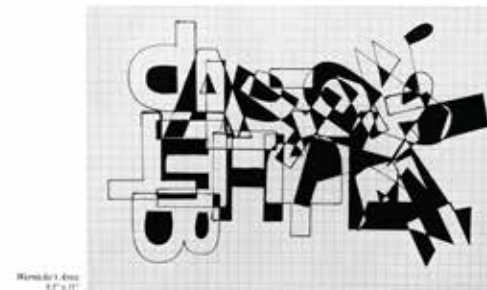
Process:

As a basis I organized the creative work I had already done into a limitation category; most death with subjective prediction as the initial idea was to simply illustrate the process of subjective processing, but I was still able to gain some direction in terms of medium focus and actual plans for finished work.

Socialization



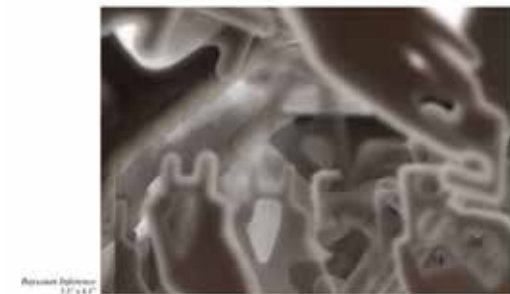
Generalization



Separation



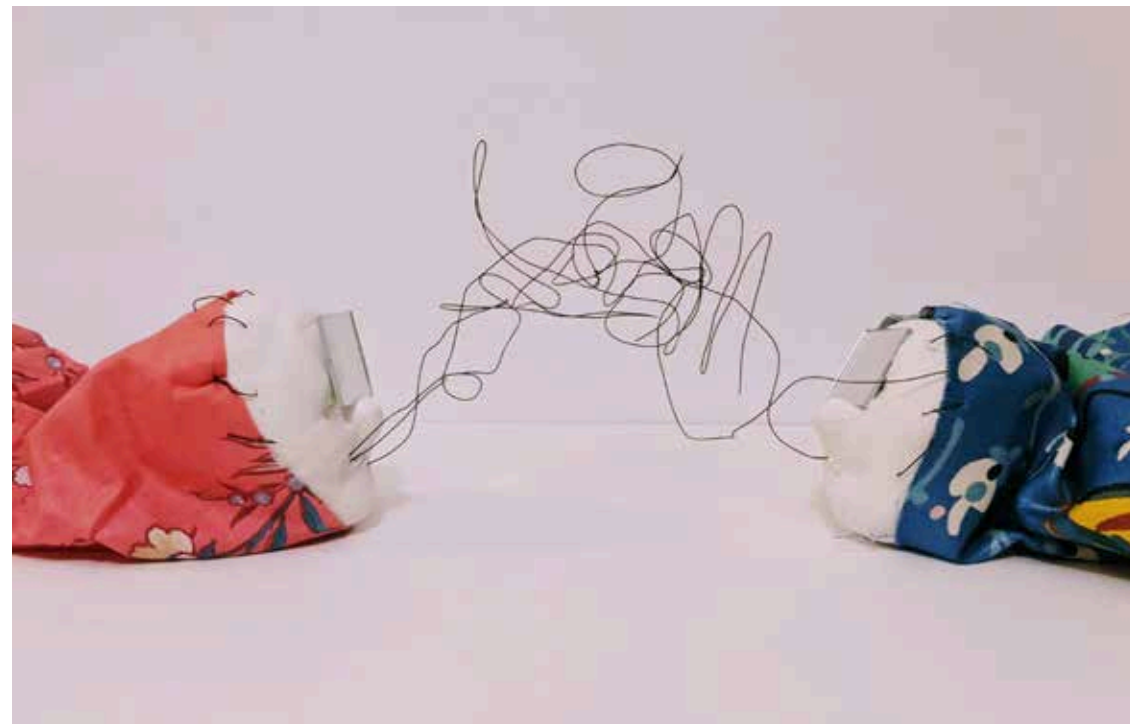
Subjective Prediction



Process:

Obviously not all the work displayed above was in the initial experimentation process, so here I'll spend more time diving into smaller decisions about medium and concept I made along the way.

While I felt the digital image of overlapping wood letters was a good initial concept of conversation, what was relevant about the limitation had more to do with social interaction than the letters/language itself. I began exploring 3 dimensional mediums to convey a sense of physicality, leading to a move from typography to sculpture.



Note: At this point I had identified specific mediums to tie to each limitation as follows:

- **Socialization** > reflection, sculpture, sequence
- **Generalization** > Repetition, grid/graph, transformation
- **Separation** > Projection, light/shadow, blur, mixed media
- **Subjective Prediction** > Overlap, photography, animation

The move from 2D work to 3D work sparked a much larger change in the direction of my final work, and ultimately led to a complete overhaul. The most influential of these second round experiments was a small fabric painting I did to illustrate Separation: I used stamps and hand painting on canvas fabric as a “self portrait” of my conscious mind while in conversation - similar to Drucker’s work I tried to coincide both the actual spoken words with the more abstract feelings present in the interaction.

Process:

After the mid-year review and critique, the main point of contention was that each limitation was very separate aesthetically from each other, making the overall cohesion of the exhibition loose. In order to be able to focus on each aspect of the project equally I decided to drop 4 different works and make one larger piece representative of the entire process.

Though this felt like a step back in my development as it meant reworking the very base aspect of the final work, I was able to find a new direction in a new stage of brainstorming.



My next steps in aesthetic development came about somewhat randomly; in my sketchbook about every other page is filled with doodles I make during lectures to aid in my focus. This is generally something I do without thinking, but it occurred to me that they exist as the “second” part of communication that I had been trying to reach through my previous iterations - the thought process silent within my own head as I’m perceiving spoken word.

This idea coincided well with several of the primary principles of design I felt worked well with the overall concept including overlap, unclear narrative, and a mix of imagery and typography.

Process:

The first question I had to answer once I decided to move in the direction of these kinds of illustrations was what the medium would be for the final work - I had put a lot of time into coming up with specific directions for each limitation separately, but if I was going to combine them it had to be something universal to the theme.

I found myself most drawn to fabric - I hadn't worked with it very much in my early iterations but what I had used (in the stamping and sculpture experimentations) seemed to fit best with the energy I wanted to invoke. Conceptually it felt like a good place to start with its ties to early craft and community, as well as being one of the first man-made objects ever regularly used. I wanted the piece to express not just the limitations of communication, but the human nature of language and the ways in which our ability to cultivate knowledge both aids and hinders our use of it.



As a first step I decided to just try a couple aspects I had most enjoyed in my earlier iterations - specifically fabric, painting, and illustration. As a starting point I referred to a phone conversation I had with a friend of mine and “cataloged” the overall tone, emotions, and events present in the act of having said conversation.

Though this was a very quick experiment and didn't use as much actual language and typography as I would end up using in later pieces, it became the new basis for the final work: making abstract “conversations” exclusively from my internal perspective.

Process:

Over the course of a week I was able to make three paintings that felt closer to the general aesthetic I was going for:



Complete with both visual and typographic elements, the pieces started to look more narrative than momentous. In an attempt to regain cohesion of the project I cultivated some motif elements including swirling line designs and the phrase "It is, I am" which I personally use as a grounding technique.



Process:

The next step in the process was to decide how the final exhibition would incorporate these various paintings - I didn't have a good idea of how many I wanted to make yet, or how they would be displayed in relation to each other. I wanted the individual paintings to speak for themselves, but also illustrate that the expanded "conversations" were still personal imaginings - by nature of the overall concept it would be impossible for another person to fully understand my point of view so it was important to me that some of the elements be left up to the individual to interpret, and for me to know.

I returned back to searching for some art precedent that would lead me to a final product, and came across Jenny Hearn, who specializes in abstract quilting. Her work is usually painted fabric, thought not illustrative, patterned in unique shapes.



What I felt most drawn to from these pieces is their ability to act as a whole while still providing the audience with an incredible amount of detail that invites them to spend more time inspecting it. They feel incredibly emotional, and encapsulate the kind of tone I wanted to create in my own work.

Process:

Once I decided to make a quilt, the rest of the creation process fell quickly into place. With its relationship to storytelling, history, and craft, a quilt felt like the perfect medium to express these selected conversations. By connecting them together into one larger whole, it turned individual conversations into a self portrait of my mind.

Overall I made 13 fabric paintings, sewn together with various solid color blocks to balance the design. Though I wouldn't say I'm experienced at sewing (or quilting), I felt that the personal touch of creation was an important quality to the work, and better exemplified the "personalized" aspect of the perspective being shown. I went with the traditional tufting quilting method, partly because the quilt was far too large to send through a machine, but partly because I wanted it to look somewhat hand-sewn.



Process:



Process:



Process:

The next step in the process was to make a pattern - I started off in photoshop and made a rough sketch for what I wanted the final design to look like:



Process:

Once I started cutting and piecing, I found that some of my initial measurement guesses were somewhat off, which led to a number of minute changes in placement.

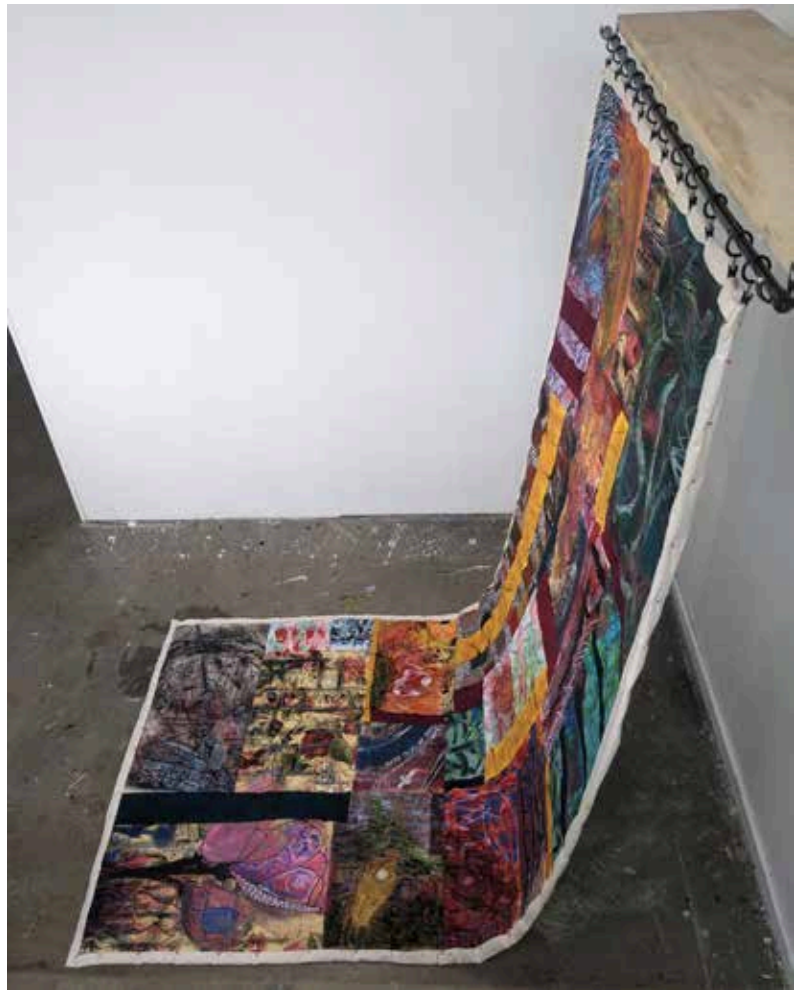


Process:

With some re-adjustments in size I was able to eliminate some unwanted bunching, and finished the piece with tufted quilting, and small designs on the solid color blocks to connect the pieces together more cohesively.



Final Work!



I hung the quilt by making a small shelf attached to a curtain rod - it is clipped onto a set of curtain rings so it can be taken off and displayed in other ways later on.

Though the space looked a little empty without anything else to cover the walls, I was happy with the results



CONCLUSION:

Overall this piece was a rocky road that ended somewhere I didn't expect in the slightest when I first pitched the concept. As a bad habit I tend to over-judge my ability to make big projects in a short period of time, and this was definitely a big reminder to not spread myself too thin and focus on what I'm good at. I love working in mixed media, and experimenting in as many ways as I can creatively, but ultimately to make something people want to look at I had to adjust my sights towards my more practiced abilities, namely painting and illustration.

While I think the work can be confusing from an outside perspective, I like to focus on personal acts of creation in my work, and I felt very successful on that end. Being able to focus solely on my own perspective for an entire year's worth of work allowed me to better understand myself as well as those closest to me. Although I don't divulge in the exhibition whose conversations these are, they are primarily comprised of close family and friends, and as such allowed me to delve into deeper and longer held emotions that I hadn't previously considered.

If nothing else the work was extremely therapeutic to make, and gives me a sense of completion that I have yet to feel in any other piece I've made thus far. Whether good or bad on the judgement of others, I am extremely proud of this work, and I hope it's able to provide some sense of completion and comfort for the audience as it has me.