

**'You can see it on the horizon now, just past forgiveness.'**

## **INTRODUCTION**

*You can see it on the horizon now, just past forgiveness* is a body of work in woodcut print exploring autobiographical narratives of emotional abuse and vulnerability using a doubling of self-portraits. The intent of this work is to share intimate moments of personal experience addressing self-deprecation and self-compassion as it relates to growth and healing from experiences of emotional abuse in intimate relationships. I have found most inspiration in moments that I felt vulnerable, shameful, and desiring the comfort of another. Often, however, I found these moments demanded resolution through self-forgiveness rather than seeking fulfillment or relief through another person. I am interested in this notion of self-compassion because what has been most pervasive to my life as a survivor of abuse is how quickly I blamed myself for allowing abuse to happen to me, how ashamed I felt for it, and how these feelings have dismantled my sense of self-worth. This work demonstrates personal struggles with self-blame and coping in young adulthood.

As part of my research for this project, I searched for other artists depicting narratives of emotional abuse, but found very little. Many artists have dealt with physical abuse, violence against women, and misogyny, but few address intimate coercion and emotional manipulation explicitly. By sharing moments of my own experience, I am seeking to develop imagery that depicts the subtle and pervasive affect emotional abuse has on a survivor's sense of individuality and self-worth.

## **CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION**

### **EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL CULTURE**

1 in 3 women will be victim to intimate partner violence within their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Intimate partner violence is defined as physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner.<sup>2</sup> The most recognized form of abuse is physical – it is the form of spousal abuse most discussed, most frequently depicted in the media, and leaves the most evidence. Emotional abuse is more subtle and difficult to discern in many cases.

Research in Behavioral Psychology has identified emotional abuse in four distinct categories: 1) the destruction or harm of pets and property; (2) sexual coercion, when the victim is made to feel guilty or afraid in the interest of the abuser's sexual desires; (3) isolation attempts, when the victim's freedom is restricted by their partner, controlling who they spend their time with

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<sup>1</sup> Günnur Karakurt and Kristin E. Silver B.A., "Emotional Abuse in Intimate Relationships: The Role of Gender and Age." *Violence and Victims* 28, no. 5 (2013): 807.

<sup>2</sup> "Intimate Partner Violence," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 22, 2017.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/index.html>.

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and jealousy; and (4) degradation. This behavior aims to undermine the victim's life and identity outside of the relationship and foster a sense of dependency between the victim and the abuser.<sup>3</sup> These forms of abuse resonate with my own experiences with intimate partner violence and have resulted in what I identify as feelings of low self-worth, confusion as a result of over identifying with my former partner, and unfair self-scrutiny. I engaged in an abusive relationship at the age of 16 and experienced over identification with my partner at the time, in turn I struggled to form a genuine and independent sense of self at a formative age.

Adolescent and college-age women, who are engaging in romantic partnerships with little experience dating are most susceptible to be victims of intimate partner violence and emotional abuse.<sup>4</sup> This topic has proved ever prevalent as conversations about intimate partner violence and sexual assault have swept college campuses in recent years. Social trends and political movements such as #MeToo and #MaybeHeDoesntHitYou have certainly increased public awareness and visibility among young people. Yet, emotional abuse is the least discussed and depicted form of intimate partner violence and can be difficult to detect if not properly taught.

I am also considering how sexual expression can contribute to self-empowerment in women, and in relation to this, how vulnerability affects a person's sense of self-worth. Brene Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, has published substantial research on vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. Brown addresses how expressing vulnerability can strengthen one's sense of self-worth.<sup>5</sup> I have certainly found this to be true even in creating the work itself. This body of work illustrates intimate and private moments of my experience and sharing them publicly is a challenging act of showing my vulnerabilities – but it has also been healing. Sharing the work with others has connected me with peers and colleagues whose experiences resonate with my own, and in turn has validated the need I saw for representation.

## CORRELATION TO INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS THERAPY

While my creative approach to express these experiences and feelings through interacting doubles was an intuitive choice, it is interesting to note that similar methods are used in psychotherapy to treat survivors of abuse and individuals who suffer with depression, anxiety, and panic. Internal Family Systems Therapy is defined by Psychology Today as:

An approach to psychotherapy that identifies and addresses multiple sub-personalities within each person's mental system. These sub-personalities consist of wounded parts and painful emotions such as anger and shame, and parts that

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<sup>3</sup> Karakurt and Silver, 804-21.

<sup>4</sup> Karakurt and Silver, 807.

<sup>5</sup> Brene Brown, "The Power of Vulnerability," TEDxHouston video, June 2010, [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en)

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try to control and protect the person from the pain of the wounded parts. The sub-personalities are often in conflict with each other and with one's core Self, a concept that describes the confident, compassionate, whole person that is at the core of every individual. Internal Family Systems focuses on healing the wounded parts and restoring mental balance and harmony by changing the dynamics that create discord among the sub-personalities and the Self.<sup>6</sup>

Creating scenarios in which several selves are interacting illustrates an internal struggle between these "sub-personalities."

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS RESEARCH AND ART MAKING

Self-portraiture and autobiography have a long standing history in feminist art. This contemporary canon is one in which my work is situated and I cannot ignore its history and the criticisms spoken against it. Published by the University of Michigan Press, *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, addresses the stakes of autobiography in contemporary art making. *Interfaces* begins this conversation by addressing the historical Western artistic practice of presenting the female body at the center of a painting or sculpture through the specular gaze of the male artist and patron.<sup>7</sup> This is commonly known in art history discourse as the "male gaze." In response, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, the editors, state, "This figuration projects upon woman a subjectivity, an identity, and a life script – that is, a biography of a sort – of a different order from her intimate experience of herself."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Smith and Watson address self-portraiture as a primary mode to engage issues of subjectivity and agency in self-representational acts. They state, "Contemporary history of women's artistic production in the twentieth century often understand the motive for narrating one's life as politicizing the personal."<sup>9</sup> Citing Dr. Marsha Meskimmon, Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History and Theory at the University of Loughborough, UK, Sidonie and Watson, explain that women artists producing self-portraiture have "revealed the ways in which their 'selves' were the products of shifting social constructs and definitions of 'woman.'"<sup>10</sup>

Addressing the criticism of narcissism in feminist art and self-portraiture, Jo Anna Isaak, the Marion Chair in Art History at Fordham University, quotes Sigmund Freud, stating, "The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that

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<sup>6</sup> "Internal Family Systems Therapy," Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/internal-family-systems-therapy>

<sup>7</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance," University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Smith and Watson, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Smith and Watson, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Smith and Watson, 16.

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such traumas are no more than the occasions for it to gain pleasure.” Despite the many problematic writings of Freud, here he comes close to “delineating a political strategy for those without access to power.” Isaak writes in response:

An examination of the *use* women artists have made of narcissism as a performative “act” opens the possibility of women’s strategic occupation of narcissism as a site of pleasure and a form of resistance to assigned sexual and social roles, a way of transcending the “unkindness of the real circumstances.”<sup>11</sup>

Certainly autobiography as subject matter for my own making has been a source for rebellion against a sociopolitical structure that has made emotional abuse, as trauma, difficult to define and avoid.

#### ARTISTIC CONTEXT

As of yet I have found no artists working explicitly with the theme of emotional abuse. Rather many artists explore the aftermath of physical abuse and externally visible intimate partner violence.

Rebecca Morgan, a contemporary artist and educator working with both self-portraiture and eroticism through painting, print, and ceramics, has stated that illustrating intimate and vulnerable scenes and scenarios of her life let’s her reclaim power and ownership of her emotions.<sup>12</sup> For me, sharing intimate, private moments has likewise been challenging, but also empowering. There is a discomfort instilled by inviting an audience in to these moments, and yet they are familiar experiences to many. In response to the erotic scenes she creates, Rebecca Morgan also identifies how she is making the private, public. Morgan is interested in exposing what you are not “supposed to see” or what is not “socially acceptable,” owning it and reclaiming it. I am also interested in this notion of privacy within spaces as it correlates to privacy of self.

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<sup>11</sup> Jo Anna Isaak, “In Praise of Primary Narcissism,” in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2002), 49-54.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Schweitzer, “Interview: Rebecca Morgan,” ART(inter) New York, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <http://artinterviewsny.com/interview-rebecca-morgan/>



Left: “Judith and Holofernes,” Rebecca Morgan, 2018

Right: “The Smoker,” Rebecca Morgan, 2012.

In a 2015 interview with ART(inter) New York, Morgan addresses the role of self-portraiture in her work, stating, “There is the expression in art: ‘paint or make what you know.’ I know myself very well – in fact, I am hyperaware. I use myself as a diaristic model; even when the cartoons or figures are not out rightly me, they represent a veiled self-portrait.”<sup>13</sup> In a recent post on Morgan’s personal Instagram, the artist further addressed why she uses herself, often in the nude, as subject matter in creative making:

As a woman, my body and gender excludes me and pinpoints me for trauma in an infinite amount of socio-political ways. I believe that your personhood cannot be removed from artmaking, therefore I’m making images of myself at its most stripped down. A lot of times the figure I make is so bodaciously depicted as a reclamation of power – I have experienced so many beautiful and horrific things in this body as a woman, but just the fact that I have this body sets me up for limitations and restrictions that others do not have to think about or experience.<sup>14</sup>

While I also am using my body as subject matter for image making, I am considering how it is both an act of personal expression to tell a very specific story of my individuality, but also how the female form in art making has a long canonical history that is complex and loaded.

Brooklyn based artist Erin M. Riley, also portrays the female body from a female gaze, working with the female form in ways that are not sexualized. Riley addresses feminine empowerment through private sexual expression and the female experience in the digital age by weaving traditional tapestries. Riley depicts women engaged in solo acts of sexual pleasure: women in feminist porn, women masturbating, women taking nude selfies for themselves, and so on. She also creates work that incorporates text and the internet – she sheds light on the complexities that the internet brings to intimate relationships and how quiet harassment can be through

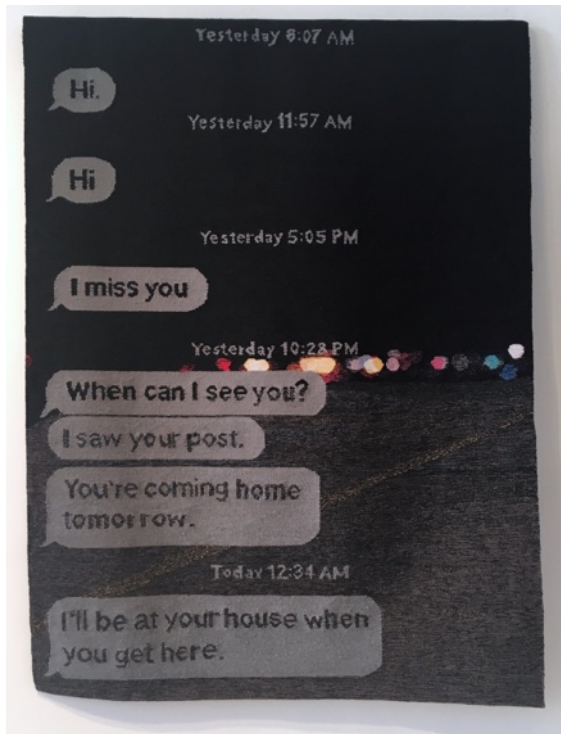
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<sup>13</sup> Schweitzer

<sup>14</sup> Rebecca Morgan (@rebeccamorgan), “Ask Us Anything: Why so nude?” Instagram story, March 16, 2019

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contemporary forms of communication like texting.<sup>15</sup> Technology played a significant role in my own experiences with abuse, as it can be used to monitor an individual's activities and communications. My former partner would ask for real-time photographic proof of my whereabouts when we were not out together, through apps such as Snapchat or Facetime. This signified his deep distrust in me and undermined my individuality – ultimately causing me to engage less and less with other people. Riley has addresses similar phenomena in her work.



Left: “Curves 2,”  
Erin M. Riley, 2017

Top Right: “Crimson  
Landslide 6,” Erin M.  
Riley, 2018

Bottom Right:  
“Unsolicited,”  
Erin M. Riley, 2017



## SELF-PORTRAITURE AND DOUBLING

I am doubling the self-portrait in this series of works – creating scenes in which two selves are interacting to directly depict the image I have of myself in real, lived moments. I am depicting both positive and negative outlooks of self-image, sharing moments of self-compassion as an act to counter the damage emotional abuse has had on my well-being, and moments of self-deprecation which perpetuate the damage. Lisa Wood, a figurative painter and instructor at the University of Manitoba School of Art has also worked with self-portraiture and doubling. She identifies an interest in multiple selves that “exist simultaneously.” She states that in the series, *Twin Reflections*, she is confronting herself, bullying herself, seducing herself, and consoling herself, and in this way is revealing a “private performance,” that addresses desire, comfort, anxiety, and self-scrutiny. Wood also worked with intaglio printmaking as part of this series,

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<sup>15</sup> Francesca Capossela, “Weaving Sexes: Tapestry Artist Threads an Honest Portrait of Female Sexuality,” *Vice*, July 8, 2016, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/evvanp/tapestry-artist-offers-honest-portrayal-of-female-sexuality](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/evvanp/tapestry-artist-offers-honest-portrayal-of-female-sexuality).



and in this way explored the idea of multiplicity inherent in printmaking.<sup>16</sup> The roll of print and multiplicity is also something I am considering as it relates to my work.



“Twin Reflection,” series, Lisa Wood, 2010

## METHODOLOGY

Initially my thesis was exclusively addressing the damage emotional abuse had on my sense of self-identity and self-worth. At the end of the abusive relationship I felt distance between the life I was conducting due to the circumstances in which I was living and the identity I wished to personify – I was acutely aware of the inauthenticity I felt within myself.

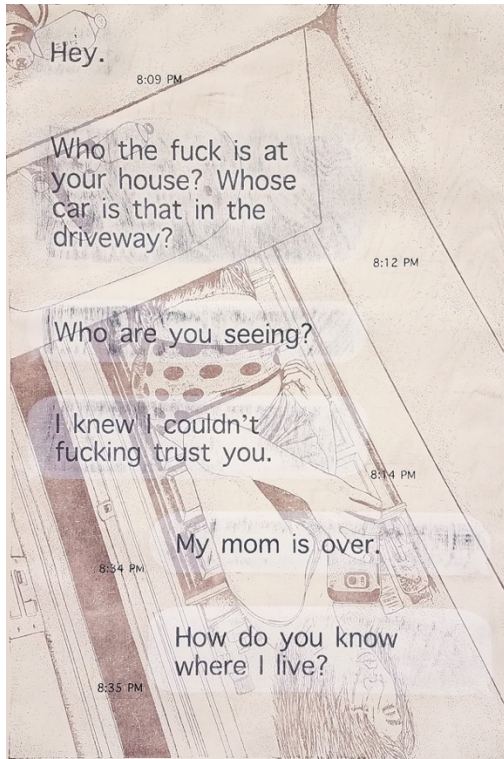
However, my central thesis question has evolved significantly throughout the project. The process of making, living and re-living personal experiences, healing and rebuilding my sense of self as a survivor of intimate partner violence has led to the following question, which is most strongly driving the work I am creating now: How do I depict the challenges of self-compassion through auto-biographical narrative and self-portraiture?

Exploring the ways in which to depict this did not start with the doubling of self-portraits, nor through the process of relief woodcut. At the start of the project, I worked in several methods of printmaking: intaglio, lithography, and woodcut. By developing similar imagery through different approaches, I was determining what method would best portray my concepts and concerns. Through woodcut, I also experimented with the addition of text, taking a cue from Erin M. Riley, I was interested in what a more direct narrative could do for the depiction of my themes and ideas.

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<sup>16</sup> Lisa Wood, “Twin Reflections,” 2010, <http://lisawood.ca/twin-reflections-2010/>

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Left: “Who are you seeing?,” Emily Legleitner, 2018

Right: “Untitled, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018,” Emily Legleitner, 2018

This brought me to what felt like a crossroads in the direction of my work – both in terms of medium and visual content. This crossroads posed many questions, the most prominent being: How important is it to me that my audience interpret precisely my intention? After sharing the work in critique, I determined that the woodcut featuring text falls short of the impact I desired. By sharing a very specific narrative, interpretation of this work was limited. The suggestive selfie in the mirror shared a more universal experience and received more engagement from the audience.

Though I moved away from the use of text, this exploration led me to choose woodcut as my primary mode of production. While I found that any printmaking method would do justice to the material I am addressing, my comfort with woodcut would allow for more rapid production of images and the ability to push the scale of the work. I found creating portraiture that is closer to life size could make the work more accessible and better to connect with – larger scale may force the audience to participate in the environment I was creating.

Doubling of the self-portraits came intuitively, as an imagined visual had while experiencing a lived moment of vulnerability. I will address these specific moments in more detail later. If I have gained anything as a survivor of abuse, it has been self-reliance, by learning how to navigate emotional turmoil alone. Learning this is not always pretty, it is a difficult process that comes with deep feelings of pity and shame, but also empowerment. As I was developing imagery, I found most inspiration in moments that I desired to be comforted, like a child longing for her mother. But often these moments demanded that I provide my own comfort, and by



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acting upon that, I made efforts to gather my strength. Depicting the interaction of two selves in the imagery of this work was a natural reaction to these feelings. One portrait is the real, lived moment of experience, while the other portrait is the alter-ego of sorts, acting in response to the lived moment.

## CREATIVE WORK



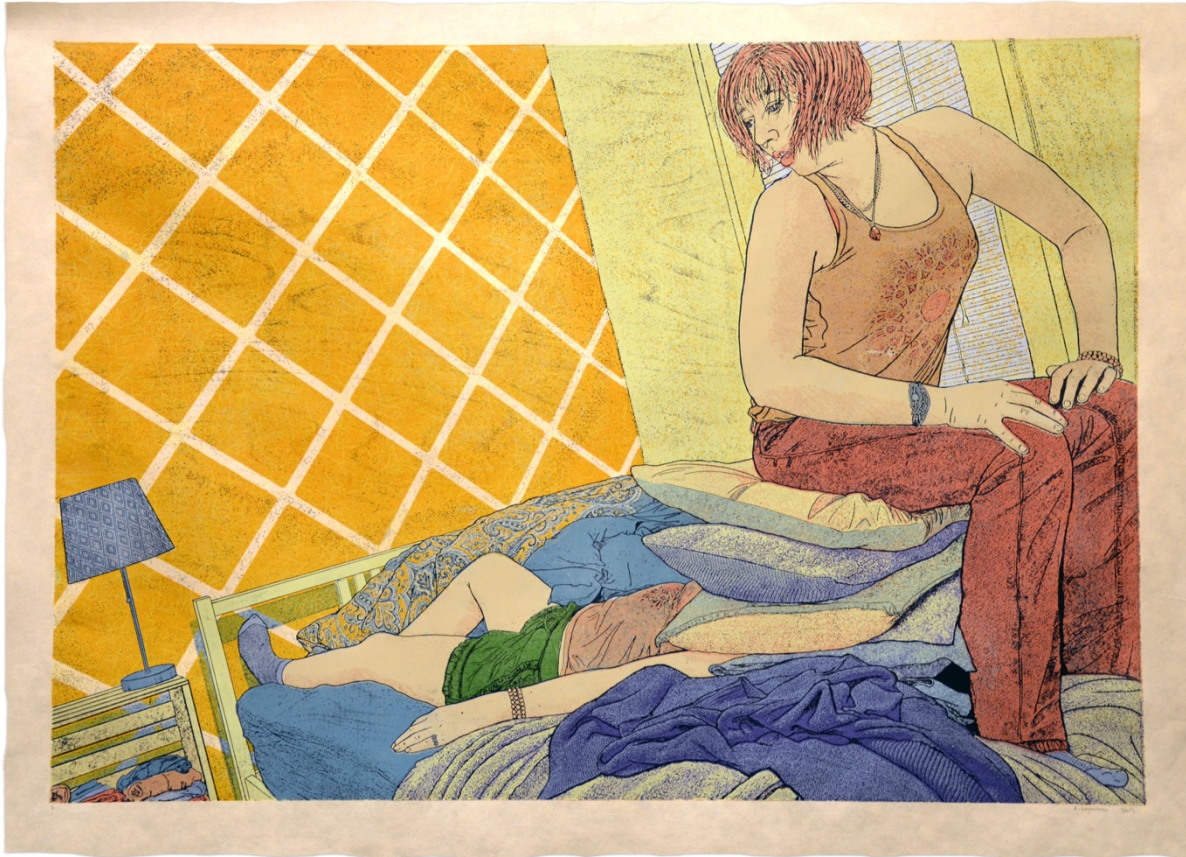
“Really though, what the hell are you doing down there?” Emily Legleitner, 2018

Doubling self-portraits started with this work. As I have stated, the images I am composing capture real moments of my experience. In the work, “Really though, what the hell are you doing down there?” for example, my real experience was laying on the floor, wallowing in self-pity and craving to be comforted. The me that sits up looking at the me on the floor is thinking, “What the hell are you doing? Get up, pull yourself together.” As I’ve spoken about the work, it has been pointed out to me that this does not sound like a compassionate approach. However, self-compassion is multi-faceted – it can be gentle and tough. This and the following two pieces better illustrate the notion of multiple selves or “sub-personalities” discussed in Internal Family



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Systems Therapy. There is both the self that is angry and the self that has collapsed, and the conflict that ensues between the two. It is possible in this moment, that the “wise mind” or core “Self” that is confident and compassionate, is not wholly present.



“I promise, I swear, I’ll never do that again.” Emily Legleitner, 2019

Self-love or self-compassion is not easy, particularly in moments of vulnerability. As the saying goes, “We are our own worst critics.” I want to address the feelings of self-loathing and self-deprecation that have come about in the process of rebuilding my sense of individuality and self-worth, as it is just as present in my mind, if not more so, as compassion is. This piece, “I promise, I swear, I’ll never do that again” depicts a lived moment of self-hatred. The lived experience is laying on the bed, the weight of my body too heavy to lift – like suffocating. Depression commonly develops in survivors of emotional abuse and intimate partner violence. Coincidentally, in the process of staging and photographing this scene to draw from, the weight of eight pillows is quite suffocating even without someone sitting atop.





“I am lucky to be not so afraid as you.,” Emily Legleitner, 2019

Different selves or “sub-personalities” play different roles. In a given moment, one may be weak while another is strong. These different selves also carry left over pieces of our past. Self-compassion is understanding those different selves and how each needs help. I am considering the aspects of mental health and personal growth that are not typically shared with the public. I want to directly address the particularly private moments that happen within the home and as part of this healing process. Even when actively trying to better ourselves, the path is not always clear, there are set backs and bad days. I think these moments are equally important to share, as they are honest.

I am also hinting at substance abuse as an unhealthy but common coping mechanism. A drinking glass was placed in the piece “Really though, what the hell are you doing down there?” The scene captured in “I am lucky to be not so afraid as you” suggests the use of substances taken too far. A pipe rests on the table of “I will lay on the floor just to call for help.” While I did not want this to be a focal point of the work, it cannot be ignored, as it is present in my life and many others.





"I will lay on the floor just to call for help.," Emily Legleitner, 2019

"I will lay on the floor just to call for help," differs from the other works in the series, as it more directly depicts the presence of "wise mind." This work shows a self that is developing an awareness of and compassion for the other selves. Notice the direct interaction of the two figures holding hands. Although these works address complex emotional struggle, and clearly that is not removed from this moment either – I think this piece has a sense of peace, or calm after the chaos. As the largest work in the series, it presents a suggested resolve as part of the works' overarching narrative.

## CONCLUSION

As a complete narrative, each work in the series, *You can see it on the horizon now, just past forgiveness*, is situated in every primary room of a home: kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, living room. In this way, this body of work feels complete – Although, I will continue to explore the same thematic considerations as I develop new work. I remain interested in the notion of personal identity and self as an act of performance, the spaces we inhabit and the evidence within that documents our daily activities. I am continuing to develop work situated within the home, capturing lived experiences in domestic spaces. However, this new work is removed from my personal experiences and captures private moments of vulnerability in other's lives.



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See below the work in development, “Brian, who lays in the bed he made,” as an example of the direction my creative practice is taking.



“Brian, who lays in the bed he made.” Emily Legleitner, digital mockup of work in progress, 2019.

As I continue to work with other people as muse or subject, I anticipate numerous challenges. Part of the reason I gravitated towards self-portraiture as means to express growth and healing from intimate partner violence was due to the authenticity I knew I could capture. If the images revealed my own lived experiences and shared my personal story, then I knew they would be true to the complex issues I sought to address. It is difficult to form relationships with people that lead to the level of intimacy and vulnerability I seek to capture.

As I reflect on the development of my work over the course of Undergraduate thesis, I am considering the implications of presenting autobiographical narratives and the challenges I faced trying to capture the complexities of personal experience and emotion. As I focused on the writing portion of thesis, developing both the accompanying paper and the label text the works were presented with, I was increasingly aware of how narrowing writing can be. I found this to be the case at many points in the project’s development, starting with writing grant proposals and later choosing to abandon text in the visual work as an approach to present my stories. Text continuously prescribed interpretation beyond that which I desired. Largely, I think this is due to just how complex the emotions are that I am navigating through this work. I have



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hinted to this in the Creative Works section. Not a singular portrayal of a person can fully encompass the overlapping emotions present in the moments I am sharing. Although in therapeutic practice parts of the self are divided up and labeled for practical purposes, it is not so clean cut in actuality. Similarly, I found it difficult to write about with precision. This analysis has led me to further appreciate the power of image making. Image making demands less precision and can be made to not be interpreted literally.

These are considerations I will carry with me as I develop new imagery. Furthermore, I will continue to consider the discourse in which my work is situated. I do not believe one body of work can fill the gap that I identified at the start: the missing representation of emotional abuse in critical art making.

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