



Will You Sleep With Me?

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“Will You Sleep with Me” is an interactive textile installation that explores the conflict between the isolation of sickness and the need for human connection through the object of the bed. Viewers are invited to use clean, gentle hands to explore the layers of bedding and discover what lies beneath the surface. I seek to portray not only a disabled identity but also concepts of gender, sexuality, and religion that influence my experiences in this space. The time and labor of the fiber techniques used reference the experiences of being bedridden while simultaneously creating a physically comforting object. My work in textiles and installation explores the intersection of craft and identity. I use bright colors and playful aesthetics to explore how I relate to the world as a young disabled woman. I use this lens to explore themes of loneliness, monotony, and nostalgia. How does one deal with the need to be known and yet hidden? How is this aspect of the human condition exaggerated by disability and chronic illness?





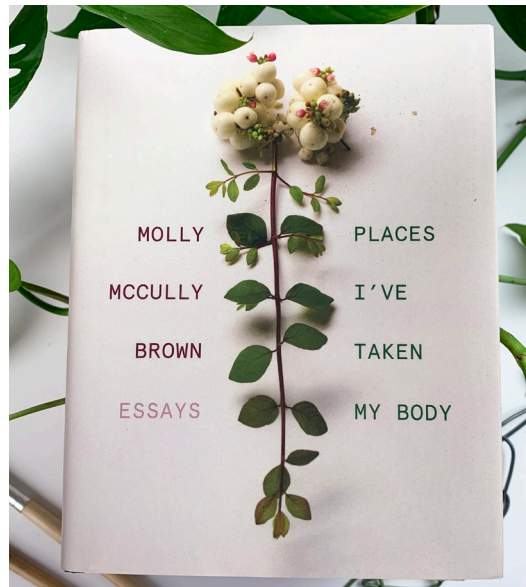






Context

Research for this project mainly fell into three areas; disability studies and theory, textiles' relationship to emotion and memory, and representations of disability and the bed in art. These areas informed the conceptualization of my project and the aesthetic and tonal choices I made in creating the installation.



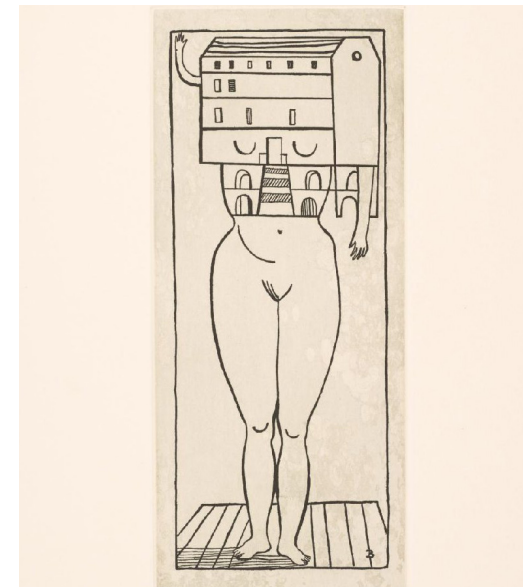
A photo of the cover of Molly McCully Brown's "Places I've Taken My Body."

One of the most influential pieces of research early on was "Places I've Taken My Body"; a collection of essays written by Molly McCully Brown, a poet with Cerebral Palsy, published in 2020. The essays present small pieces of her life focusing on a variety of topics; from religion to the death of her twin. However, they all center on the experience of having, and being trapped within, a body. Her words are deeply personal and yet incredibly relatable. This book exists as a form of poetry and autobiography. It is a heartfelt contribution to disability literature, focusing on human experience rather than academic study or empirical evidence. This type of primary evidence can be difficult to find in disability studies. Despite the difference in medium, this book was a huge inspiration in how I approached the deeply personal subject matter of my own IP project. It is tender without being placid towards hard experiences, a tone I emulated as I explored my own disability.



An image of crumpled bedsheets, credit: Sincerely Media

Peter Stallybrass's essay *Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning, and the Life of Things* discusses how clothing, particularly because they are made from fabric, is able to act as a memorial to the person who owned it. Fabric will maintain the scent, wrinkles, stains, and sweat of a person long after they have stopped using it. He argues that, because of this, an appreciation for clothing should not be viewed as childish or shallow. I extended this connection between body and fabric to the bedsheets; a simple piece of fabric that carries an intimate relationship with our bodies, from birth to death and every night in between. Stallybrass's writing inspired me to keep the fabric of the bed at the center of my project. By utilizing used bedsheets, I was able to emphasize the connection between body, time, and the bed.



Louise Bougrouis, *Femme Maison*, 1984

Lynn M. Somers essay "Aesthetics of Disability and the Hybrid Body in Louise Bourgeois's *Femme Maison*" is an exploration of the visual language used by Bourgoise to represent physical and psychological disability. She looks at Louise Bourgeois's *Femme Maison*, starting with the artist's early sketches and ending with the completed series of works in oil, ink, and gouache. *Femme Maison* depicts a female form in some way distorted by a building. For example, an early sketch shows a female figure standing straight-legged with a house over its upper torso and head with smaller than proportional arms coming out either side of the structure. Somer's analysis focuses on distortion of the form as method of representing disability and femininity. Both the visual imagery of *Femme Maison* and Somer's writing about the piece helped me consider how I would represent my own body in my work.



Felix Gonzales-Torre, *Untitled (Billboard of an Empty Bed)*, 1991

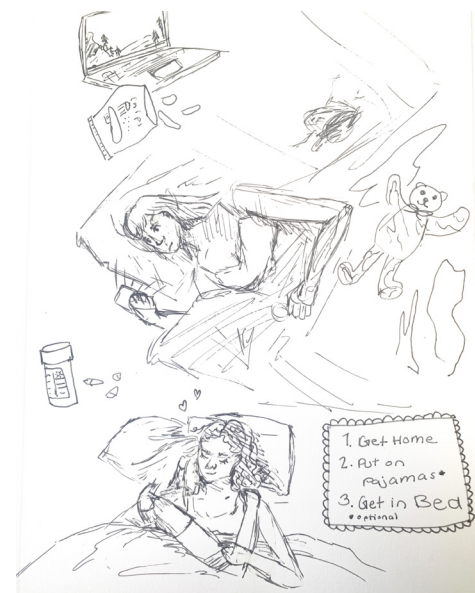
Another artistic precedent for my IP work was Felix Gonzales-Torre's piece "Untitled (Billboard of an Empty Bed)". This work, made in 1991, is a close-up image of the top part of a bed with white sheets and a white duvet. The two pillows are pressed in as if there had just been a head lying on it. Similarly, the duvet is pushed down and crumpled. The image was shown blown up on billboards and displayed throughout New York. Like most of Gonzalez-Torres works, "Untitled" looks at loss in queer relationships during the AIDs epidemic. The empty bed implies a body or presence that is no longer there. It hints at but is not explicit in its representation of a same-sex relationship or references to AIDs. I was very interested in how Gonzalez-Torres was able to represent and body and its presence without actually showing a figure. I was also really drawn to the way he used the material qualities of fabric to do this.

Process



Initial brainstorming on the topics of nostalgia, beds, and quilts.

My process began with a lot of brainstorming around concepts I have always been interested in; fibers, nostalgia, quilts, identity, and even beds but I had no clear idea of how to narrow these ideas into a concise topic. That was until a flare-up of one of my many chronic illnesses left me bedridden and in and out of the hospital for almost two weeks. Suddenly, this intimate connection between bed, body, and my own disability was magnified. As I was still recovering, I dove into academic research which, ironically, could be done from my bed, unlike the making my peers were doing. When I was able to return to the studio, I found myself struggling with how to depict my conflicting ideas about my experiences in bed. I started by making sketches of how I existed in bed. I also pinned a used bedsheet to my wall and started, almost literally, throwing ideas at it. By the end, the sheet was covered in paintings of beds, outlines of myself as I sleep, charcoal drawings based on Mary Cassatt's sketches, appliqued figures, and even "goodnight" texts from my partner. This first bedsheet became the foundation of my IP work even making it into the final exhibition. My time spent in bed is not just one thing. It is comforting, it is sad, it is exciting, it is exhausting, it is constricting, it is freeing. The dream-like chaos of the piece encapsulated this contradictory relationship with the bed as a disabled person.



Sketches of the various ways I exist in bed.



Blind contour self-portraits exploring distortion of body.



Bird's eye sketch of my bed.



Left: Progression of the making process of the first bedsheet I made.
Bottom: The completed bedsheet hanging in my studio





Full view of the second bedsheet I created, showing me and my partner how we cuddle (intertwined) and how we naturally sleep (facing away from each other).

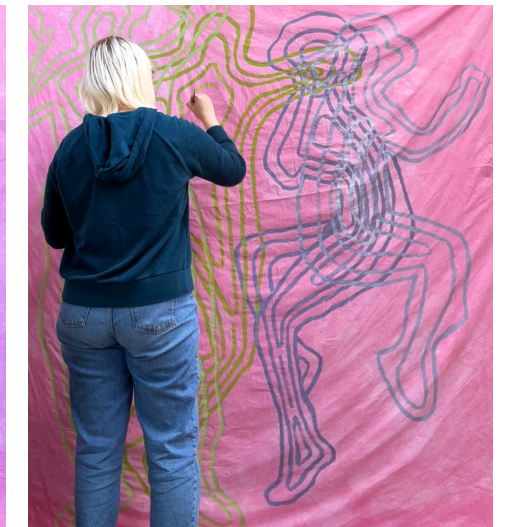
I wanted to continue this exploration of the bedsheet as a canvas so I started making a second one, this time being more intentional about how I could portray my body, time, and relationships. I started by laying on a sheet and pinning where the fabric folded and wrinkled around my body. I then dyed this piece of fabric in a vibrant pink hoping that the pinned folds would resist the dye. While this only partially worked, the resulting pattern worked as a good starting background. This second bedsheet was larger, and meant for a full or queen bed rather than a twin. This encouraged me to examine relationships with other people in bed more closely than I had in the previous piece. A large part of my disabled experience is spending a lot of time in bed. So I really wanted to explore how bodies exist over time within the bed. To do this I repeated a similar technique as the first bedsheet, laying down with my partner and tracing our bodies; once while we were intertwined and again how we actually sleep naturally. I used repeating lines within these outlines to create energy and movement within the forms. This also began to give me a visual language for the tension between needing the support of others when dealing with illness and the need for independence.



Close up of the wrinkled and pinned bedsheet, prepared for dyeing.



Image of the early stages of painting the outlines onto the sheet.



Later stages of painting the intertwined outlines of the two bodies.

While I was happy with how my work was developing, I felt I was ignoring some of the material possibilities of using fabric as for the foundation of my work. I wanted to honor my roots as a fiber artist and consider more deeply how I could come up and off of the sheets. Inspired by Felix Gonzales-Torre's piece "Untitled (Billboard of an Empty Bed)", I wanted to consider how physical tension could represent the emotional tension I was experiencing when trying to articulate my feelings towards the bed.

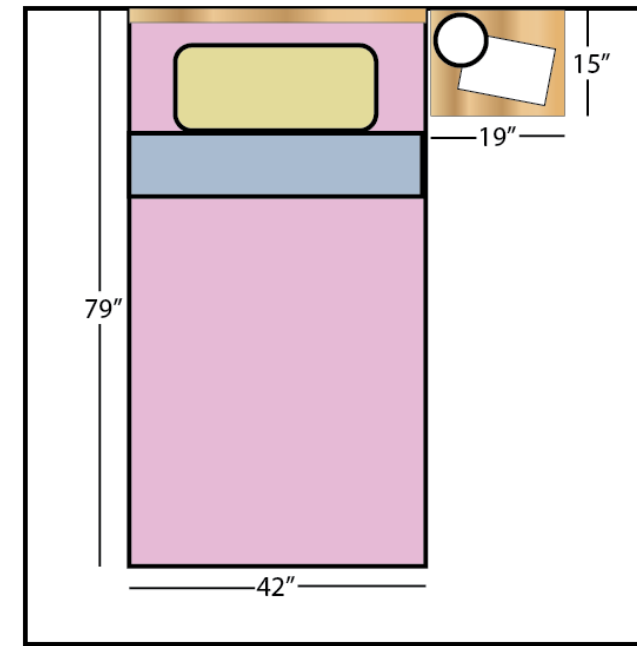


Images of some of the fiber additions I made to the second bedsheet.

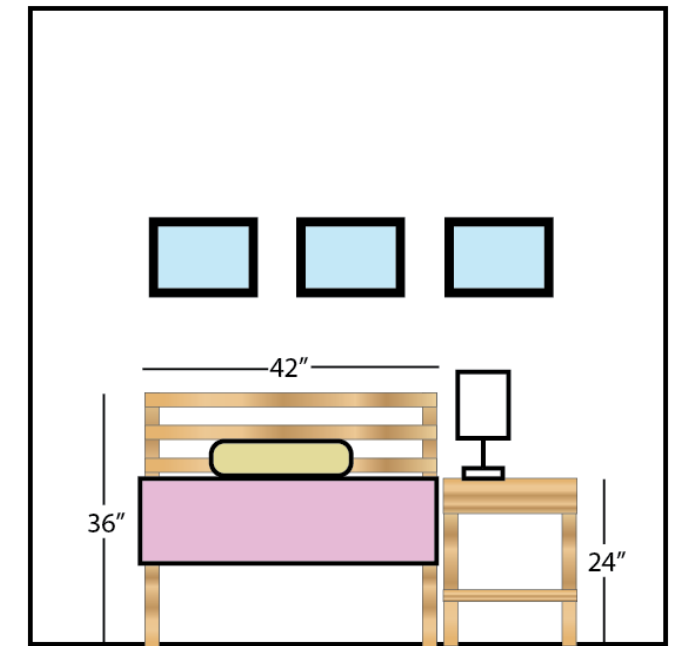
As my second semester working on this project began, I began consider two very important questions: what did I want to say about the bed and disability and how was I going to display the work I had made. As I thought about how to display the work, I was very interested in how viewers would interact with the actual bedsheets and weather I want them to be displayed as such or more similarly to a canvas or mural. In some early concepts for the exhibit I thought about covering the entire space in sheets surrounding a bed, hanging just the two I had made on the wall and even incorporating projections onto a central bed. However as the actual making progressed I felt these ideas distracted from my goal of emphasizing the bed and experiences with in it. Ultimately I decided on a simple arrangement that would allow the viewer to enter the space of a bedroom and explore the pieces I had made. Each layer of bedding would act almost like a page in a book which when pulled back would reveal more information beneath it. While some elements changed from the plan shown on the right and the final exhibit, the concept stayed generally the same. Most notable, I added large birds eye view prints of the bedding slowly being pulled back to encourage viewers to look at and touch the bedding.



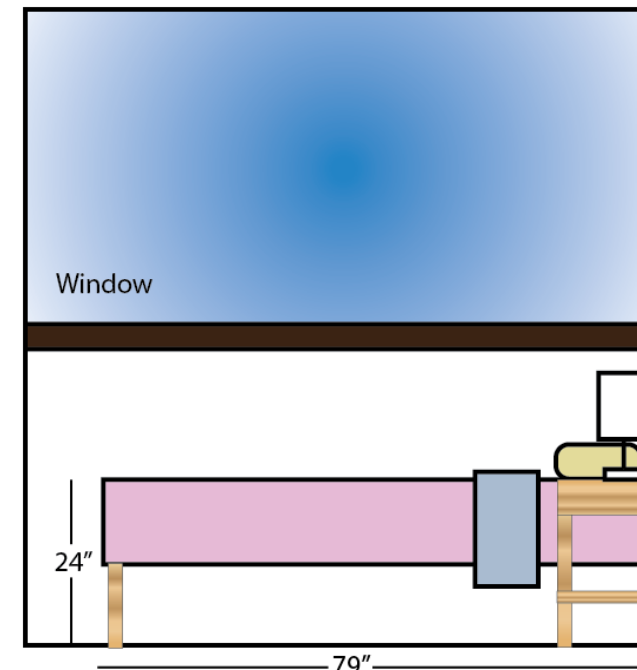
Early concepts of the exhibit design for "Will You Sleep With Me?"



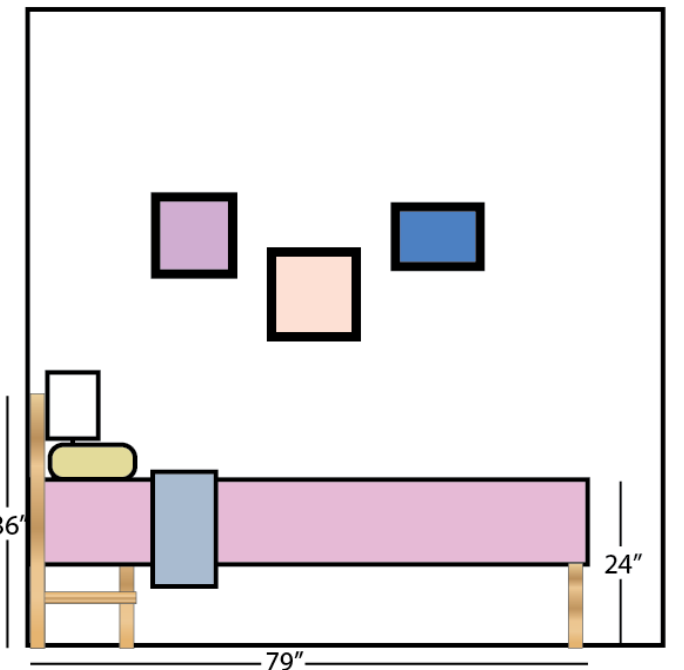
Top Down View



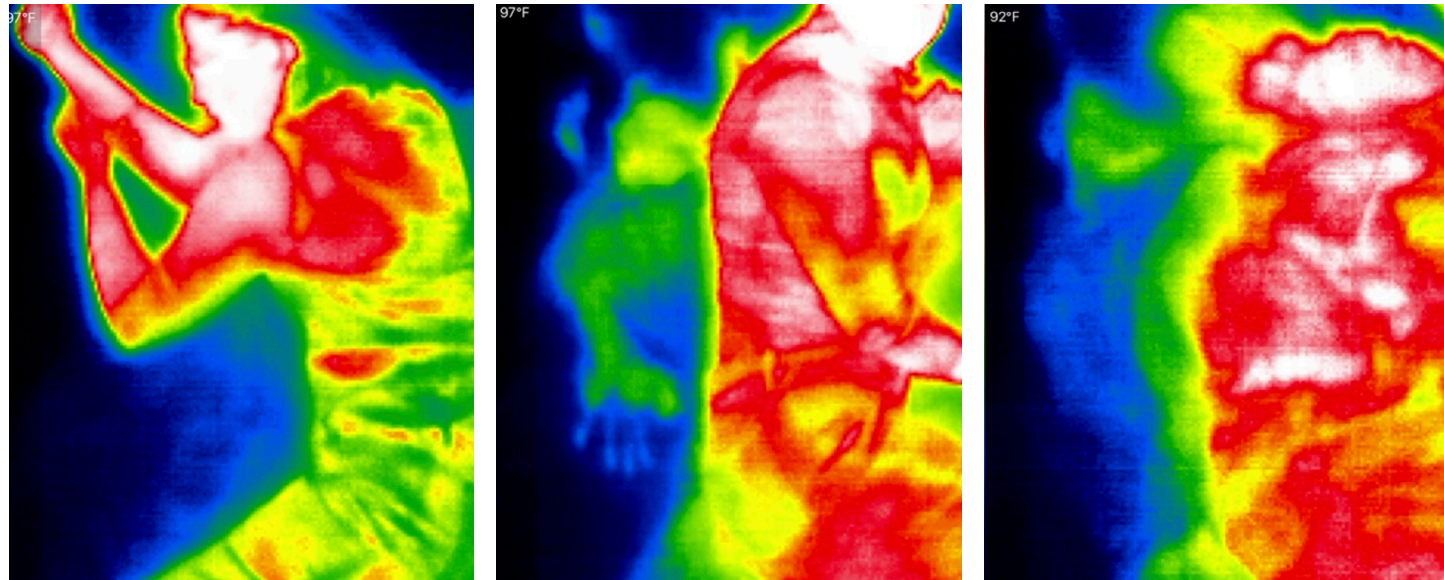
Back Wall View



Left Wall View

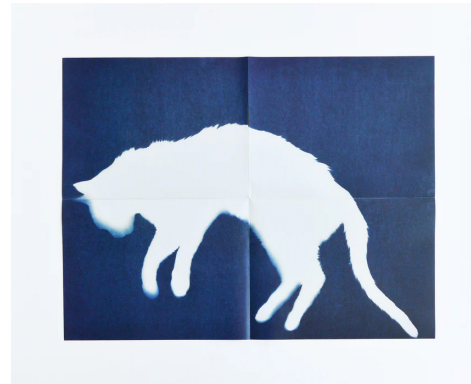


Right Wall View



Thermal images of me laying in different positions.

I also began to focus on documenting a passage of time in bed. One way I did this was by using alternative photography techniques. I used a thermal camera to record the various positions I layed in bed in and the heat I left behind on the bedding. I was also interested in using cyanotype as a method of documenting rest while using my body as a tool in the process. Heavily inspired by Julia Schlosser's *Alex's Body*, I eventually created a fitted sheet using the technique. Cyanotype exposes in the sun, so I covered all the fabric in the chemicals then layed on top of the sheet outside, moving my position every few minutes. This created a distorted shadow of a figure on the bedding which echoed a lot of the dissonance of I feel towards my own body. I can make out aspects of normalcy, but much it is unfamiliar and unpredictable. I finished the sheet by free motion stitching outlines of the figures and other details to give definition and contrast to the composition.



Julia Schlosser, *Alex's Body*, 2018



The fitted sheet being exposing in the sunlight.



The bedsheet drying, showing the silhouette of my laying position.



Free motion stitching to emphasize the outlines of my body on the cyanotype.



The final and most intensive piece of the installation was the quilt. A lot of my early brainstorming and interest in quilts as a domestic object inspired me to make one as the top most layer of the bedding to be displayed on the bed. I wanted to incorporate both traditional quilt blocks and other squares which told a narrative of wanting to be known and loved. While the form of the earlier bedsheets allowed me to approach them in a more free and generative manner, the technical requirements of sewing together individual pieces which would fit together forced me to plan each element and overall composition deliberately. I started to make groups of blocks which each served a different purpose in the overall composition.



Cyanotype images of my body and past bedrooms I have occupied which brought the themes of the piece to the front and center while adding tonal contrast to the composition

Embroidered squares featured phrases and imagery that added to the narrative of the quilt

Cut out squares from the second bedsheet where the lines of our bodies intersected showing non-literally the complex relationships that have been influenced by my disability

Traditional quilt blocks which brought a feeling of domesticity and comfort

Abstract depictions of body through organic shapes pieced together

These pieces were then arranged and sewn together to create an abstract narrative of longing to be known, a fight for independence in the face of relying for others, and reconciliation with ones own body. Yet the physical object of the quilt remains bright and inviting, a warm place of respite from these challenges, just as I have experienced the bed to be.

Center: Cyanotype quilt blocks
Right: Top stitching the final quilt



Conclusion

The experience of putting together my IP project was full of physical and emotional labour but I could not be more proud of what I produced. I was able to dive subjects such as disability, gender, sexuality, human connection, domesticity, and even craft and installation that I have always been interested in. I was able to do present deeply personal experiences in an approachable and comfortable manner that asks viewers to consider their own experiences. As therapeutic as this work was for me personally, I hope it will allow others to gain a deeper understanding of people with disabilities while recognizing our similarities. We all have a body we must recon with. We all long to be know. We all need independence. We all experience deep and complex relationships with each other. These experiences are simply a part of being human. The bed I present in "Will You Sleep With Me?" simply places a spotlight on how chronic illness has influenced my struggle with these aspects of life.





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