

heart of plush

By

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Abstract

heart of plush is an exhibition of a series of large-scale drawings that imagines various scenes and narratives of a parallel universe inhabited by a community of naked, vulnerable, genderless creatures called *fumblys*. This work presents a fictional space in which violence, hostility, and aggression is softened through the formal use and manipulation of colors, textures, and portrayal of figurative gestures. My imagined utopianistic alternate universe exemplifies a hopeful and naive expectation of a potential future in which humankind can be as tender, negotiable, and forgiving as *fumblys*.

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Acceptance Page	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
I. Introduction	1
II. Installation and description of works	3
III. Themes and References	9
<i>i.</i> Visualizing Labor	9
<i>ii.</i> Cloudscapes	13
IV. Drawing / Image-making	16
V: Conclusion	18
Works Cited	19

I. Introduction

My work imagines a softer and more empathetic alternate universe inhabited by a community of naked, plushy creatures called *fumblys*. As I observe my own interactions with people and environments, digesting the social, political, and cultural climate of our time, and looking back to historical tragedies and precedents of mistreatment of each other, I try to make sense of how we can learn to nurture empathy. By working through my thought process in drawing, I attempt to understand how personal and collective conflicts arise and the ways in which we learn to cope, mend, and forgive each other. I am driven to make work by imagining a world that is softer and more forgiving, as I reflect on the social implications and struggles of living among a community of emotional beings.

I invented my own creatures called *fumblys* that live collectively in their plushy ecosystem. *fumblys* come in different sizes, shapes, and colors; some disfigured and disembodied. They have no sense of smell or vision, but can only sense the touch and temperature of each other's bodies. They are soft, naked, raw, and vulnerable as well as playful, melancholic, and clumsy. They learn to live collectively among family, friends, and romantic partners and these relationships range from parasitic to nurturing ones. The following is a poem that accompanies my exhibition in which the empathetic and vulnerable nature of *fumblys* is expanded upon:

“With very tender memory muscles
fumblys tingle guilt and affection.

Their spectrum of growth
measured in heavy layers of invisibility.

Their perception of depth

felt by a sinking heart.

Their field of vision a swarming blur of colors.

Living on slippery slopes
a valley of plush

where they carry and sleep
on their vaporous dreams.”

The imagery in the exhibition reflects how I digest my personal experiences in the greater context of living among a community of people with different experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs. While many miles away from family and friends, I’m fully aware of the difficulties of making an effort to keep myself connected to the people who I care about most. In any kind of relationship — whether it be familial, romantic, professional, and/or friendships — the emotional, social, and physical labor is rarely equal among the people involved. This imbalance of affection is brought to equilibrium in various ways depending on the relationship — one may invest more labor into the relationship or take turns in realizing the need to reach out, catch up, and take care of each other. This series of drawings attempts to make visible the invisible layers of both individual and collective efforts in building and sustaining personal relationships.

II. Installation and description of works



Figure 1. *heart of plush*, Installation View, KU Chalmers Art & Design Gallery, 2018

heart of plush is an exhibition comprised of four large-scale drawings depicting abstract narratives of romantic and/or familial disputes, negotiations, and ultimatums among *fumblys*. Each drawing occupies a wall space and the drawings encompass the viewers' field of vision. The scale of the drawings as well as the composition and directionality of the imagery considers the specifications of the high ceiling and enclosed cubic space of the gallery. The overall effect of the show attempts to create a feeling of ascension, inviting the viewers' mind space into the *fumblys'* lush and heavenly landscape.

Scale is an integral element of this body of work. From a distance, the vibrance of colors, the radiance of light, and plush textured landscape contextualizes the works to exist in the same

narrative and representational space. Up close, viewers will see a multitude of layers of cross-hatched colors as well as nuanced and exaggerated figurative interactions among the *fumblys*.

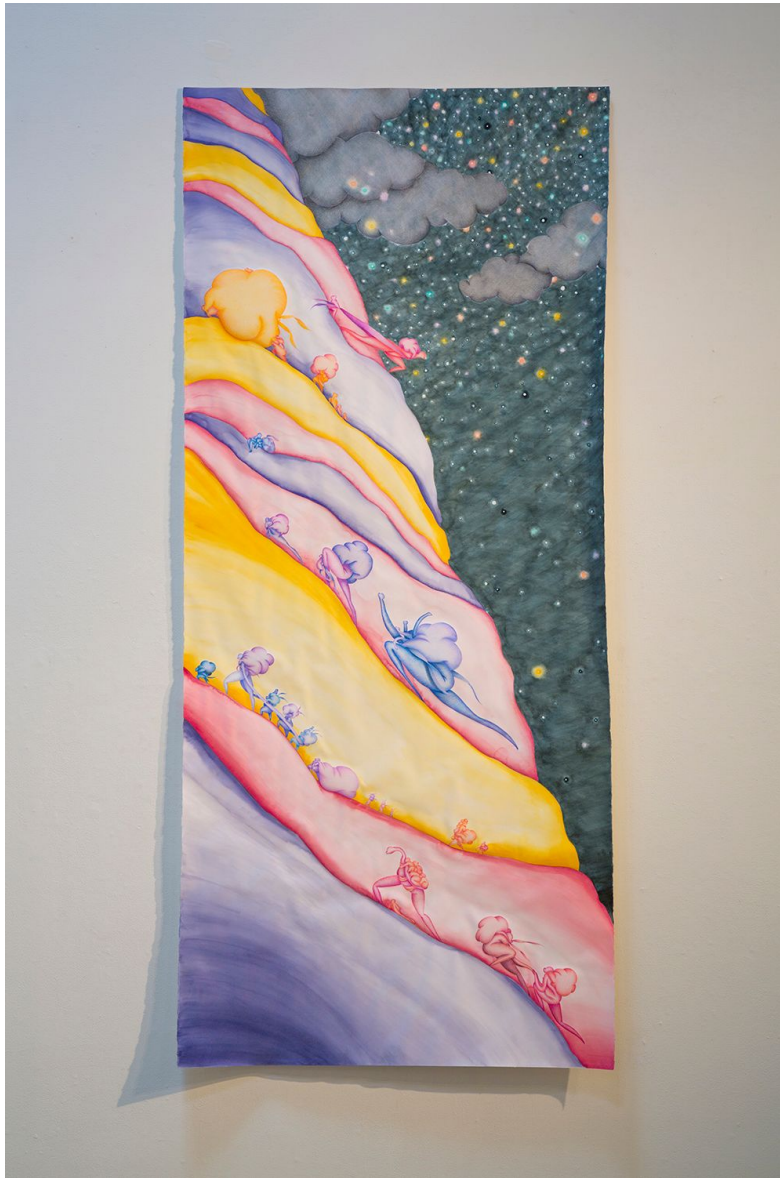


Figure 2. *love mobility*, Watercolor and colored pencil on paper, 96 in x 44.5 in, 2018

In *love mobility* [fig. 2], the diagonal and upward composition of the steep landscape is emphasized by the directionality of the watercolor textures as well as the hiking *fumblys*. This

drawing reflects the possibility of collaborative social mobility among a community. Regardless of their difference in individual body build — whether it be their height, body mass, or leg stride — *fumblys* have the heart and thighs to not only pull their own weight but also help those who are smaller and weaker. Although they are faceless creatures, the gestures of leading, carrying, and uplifting companions suggests care and concern for each other [fig. 3].



Figure 4. *billowing hearts*, Watercolor and colored pencil on paper, 126 in x 156 in (Each panel: 108 in x 52 in), 2018

The central drawing, *billowing hearts* [fig. 4] leads viewers into an environment beyond the hill after the hike. The change in scenery suggests viewers ascending into a more majestic, and heavenly landscape where potential lust and deceit-fueled conflicts are unfolding. There are multiple pairs of couples that are possessively intertwining and tangling their bodies. Additional limbs of arms extend from outside inward into the image, implying an attempt to tug in or pull

away *fumblys* from their partners. In this particular image, the suggested conflict along with the lack of emotional, facial expression of *fumblys* complicates the lines of protagonist and antagonist within these partnerships.

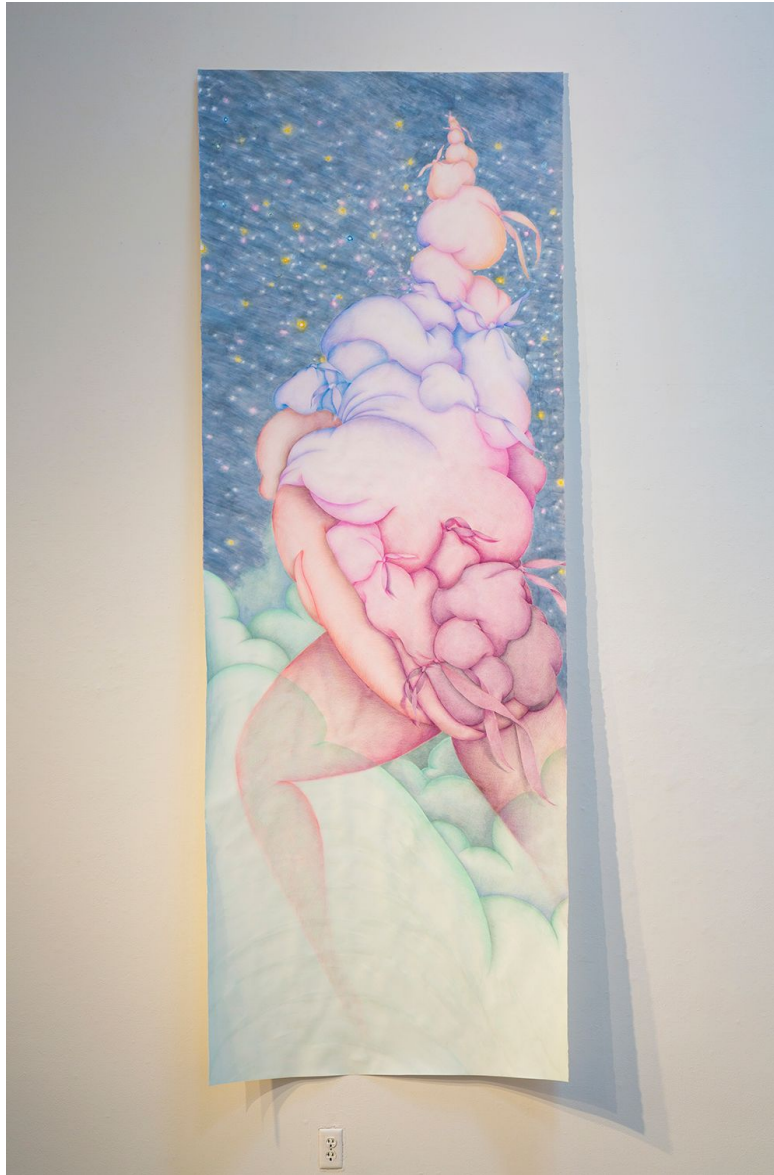


Figure 5. *tender courier*, Watercolor and colored pencil on paper, 120 in x 44.5 in, 2018

The singular figure, *tender courier* [fig. 5] is seemingly walking away from the lust fueled squabble. Whether the mounting baggage on its back be its own or the collected remnants of what

others have left behind, this courier has made the decision to take it upon itself to walk away with a load of belongings. Through the verticality of the paper size as well as the image composition, I want the viewers to consider the scale of their body in relation to the figure — mounted with an over-exaggerated physical burden towering atop.



Figure 6. *awaying*, Watercolor, colored pencil, and mylar collage on paper, 36 in x 48 in, 2018

Zooming out from the soaring figure of *tender courier* and moving onwards into an atmospheric, cloudy plushscape, *awaying* [fig. 6] portrays a small yet expansive space. The smaller scale of this drawing offers a more intimate viewing experience of a distant landscape wherein the figure can only be discovered after close inspection. Within this image is a lone *fumbly* cannonballing through the sky perhaps taking off and parting away from the clouds or rather, entering the vaporous environment [fig. 7]. The sense of journeying of body and emotion is prevalent throughout the exhibition. *fumblys* are in constant pursuit of emotional reciprocity while knowing deep in their hearts that equilibrium will never be achieved. Their cloudy, vaporous,

placeless, and transient habitat reflect the *fumblys'* liminal existence of being stuck between the valley of reality and naive hopefulness.



Figure 7. Detail from *awaying*, Watercolor, colored pencil, and mylar collage on paper, 36 in x 48 in, 2018

The sequence in which the drawings are installed aims to visually and mentally stimulate a perception of infinite expansion beyond the dimensions of the paper and the gallery space. As seen in [fig.1], the composition of *love mobility* (on the right), *tender courier* (on the left) and the wall space given between each drawing centralize and emphasize the climactic sense of ascension in *billowing hearts* (in center). Although the imagery is singularly complete and resolved within each drawing, the exhibition as a whole intends to elicit a feeling of etherealness among viewers.

III. Themes and References

i. Visualizing Labor:

My fictional narrative built through an imagery of otherworldly characters and visual sensations is grounded in the ordinary and mundane task of the everyday. The subject of labor is integral in my work as the physical gestures of “work” performed by *fumbllys* suggests a universal language of caring. Work is sustenance and is a way to provide for others financially and emotionally. Artists from various cultures have depicted images of labor throughout time.



Figure 8. *The Gleaners*, Jean-François Millet, Oil on canvas, 33 in x 44 in, 1857, Musée d'Orsay

Millet's *The Gleaners* [fig. 8] depict three women deeply hunched over, picking the remnants of a bare, already-harvested wheatfield.

The Flower Carrier by Diego Rivera depicts a man attempting to lug an oversized basket of beautiful flowers with a help of a woman, preparing to leave for the market to sell the flowers [fig. 9].



Figure 9. *The Flower Carrier*, Diego Rivera, Oil and tempera on masonite, 48 in x 47.75 in, 1935, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art



Figure 10. *Two Chatting Women with Two Children*, Käthe Kollwitz, Lithograph, 19.75 in x 14.125 in, 1930

The depiction of motherhood in Käthe Kollwitz' prints and drawings portrays the desperation and anxiety of mothers trying to protect their children from harm and death [fig. 10]. Living through both world wars and losing her son in World War I and her grandson in World War II, Kollwitz has seen and experienced firsthand the injustice among humankind. Kollwitz' sense of empathy is exemplified by her commitment to exclusively portraying the lives of the working class — a truthful, compassionate anti-narrative which counters the self-congratulatory, militaristic, and propagated social narrative shaped by Germany's ruling class (McVeigh, 2016, 23). Whether the figure is visibly carrying physical weight like the flower vendor in [fig. 9] or a subtle gesture of a mother's arm lightly embracing her child in Kollwitz' image [fig. 10], visualizing physical labor suggests and extends our understanding of emotion and concerns of caretakers for their loved ones.

The bulbous baggage that *fumblys* carry around with them are visual representations of both physical labor and emotional baggage [fig. 11]. I stack and mount backpacks ranging in size and quantity on top of the figures with some *fumblys* struggling more than others to carry the weight of their baggage. I am interested in visualizing gestures of compassion and caring within my images in an attempt to imply internal struggle through the over-exaggerated depiction of physical burdens. Imagery of labor can be universally understood as many of us see or have seen our family, partners, friends, and colleagues work for themselves and for others. Labor exemplifies a concern of the future — an experience and outlook intended to move people forward and hopefully not backwards. The actions of caring are a learned experience in which generations over time work to better the lives of those who come next.



Figure 11. Detail from *love mobility*, Watercolor and colored pencil on paper, 96 in x 44.5 in, 2018

As a daughter of a couple who has managed to own a private business together for over 20 years and has provided me with countless opportunities, I have seen first hand and continue to see

their labor of love put into their professional and emotional work to take care of each other as well as myself. My exhibition, *heart of plush* intends to represent and make visible the oftentimes invisible or forgotten work of those around us who continue to spend their lifetime caring about one another.

ii. Cloudscapes:

Clouds are both familiar and majestic. Historically, the subject of clouds in images has presented the magnification of beauty in the commonplace as well as a signifier of separation between the mortal and immortal, particularly in religious imagery. Regardless of the stylistic choices in which artists depict cloudscapes, there is a clear tendency in which the natural world is idealistically rendered.



Figure 12. *Untitled (one day it all comes true)*, Jim Hodges, Denim fabric and thread, 144 in x 288 in, 2013, Hammer Museum

José Esteban Muñoz in his book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* observes how artists transform images of landscapes as a way to envision how a world should look, feel, and be (2009, 42). Muñoz refers to Jim Hodges' camouflage painting as a case study to understand the embodiment of utopian ideals through depicting the landscape in a specific manner. When asked about the use of camouflage in his paintings, Hodges responds,

Camouflage is a rendering of nature. This is what attracted me to it and still does. It is a manmade depiction of nature by artist Abott Thayer. He made his observation about animal concealment and goes on to render nature in this simple reduced pattern of shadows — light and dark. I enjoy working with its source, which is nature, and then the issues that have been layered on it politically and culturally. (Hodges, 2003, 15)

In this case, the act of ornamenting the world — a cloudscape translated in camouflage through the transformation of ordinary materials such as denim fabric and thread — reflects Hodges' desire to see past the limits of the current state of existence and envision a new state of being and becoming [fig. 12].

I ornament the landscape of *fumblys* with soft textures and luminous colors to set a optimistic sensibility and attitude in this body of drawings. Although *fumblys* look alien with their faceless heads, the way they act among their companions is gentle and affectionate. With an array of radiant colors rendering the environment and figures, I intend my drawings to visually glow and suggest a both literal and conceptual effect of a “light at the end of a tunnel.”

The small *fumblys* perched on top of a cloudy hill in the lower right hand corner of *billowing hearts* [fig. 13] are voyeurs — like the viewers — witnessing the tender conflicts unfolding in front of them. For both voyeurs — *fumblys* and viewers — the impassioned entanglement among the towering *fumblys* is a reflection of the state of being and becoming an emotional creature. By

ornamenting a landscape of my own, I imagine a potential reality and future that could feel and be as tender as the *fumblys* and its plushscape habitat.



Figure 13. Detail from *billowing hearts*, Watercolor and colored pencil on paper, 126 in x 156 in, 2018

VI. Drawing / Image-making

In *The Material Culture of Enchantment: Images at Work* (2018), David Morgan discusses how images are agents and visual devices in which viewers are able to form a bond or attraction to images and/or objects by various associations to the world around them. He further describes that

“images are an interactive device that responds to being seen by co-creating a relation with its viewer, whose consciousness takes shape with the image in intertwining structures of feeling, memory, and expectations...In other words, images work by virtue of analogy...They touch or move us when we have reason to care about them, such as images of forebears or one’s own children — images of those for whom we have great affection or from whom we have descended and in which we glimpse something of our own origins.” (Morgan, 2018, 55-56)

By observing *fumblys* intermingle with their companions, I would like my viewers to be able to associate the *fumblys* gestures of empathy to the real, compassionate gestures manifested daily by friends and family. By stripping away visual human qualities like the face from *fumblys*, the figures can take on the role of what the viewer perceives and projects their position and persona to be. Like in Mannerist works, I exaggerate physical features and figurative gestures of the *fumblys* to dramatize emotion and physical sensations of grasping, embracing, and carrying. I de-individuate cultural and individual signifiers by presenting *fumblys* as colorful and naked beings in which empathetic expression is visualized only through body language.



Figure 14. Detail from *tender courier*, Watercolor and colored pencil on paper, 120 in x 44.5 in, 2018

By exclusively using cross-hatching, I am able to build numerous layers of color that build the plush volume in the cloudscape and the figures. Colors shimmer through each layer and the bright white of the paper in combination with a light wash of watercolor, create a luminous surface. The cross-hatched marks [fig. 14] emphasize directionality within each drawing's composition in addition to the exhibition as a whole. The series of drawings is intended to move the viewer's eyes across the entire space like a panoramic view of the *fumblys'* world. Furthermore, visualizing the idea of labor as practice of love is further reiterated in my work through the use of mark-making.

The repetitive action of layering individual small marks to imagine and embody a larger, more infinite sense of a world mimics the idea of transcending emotional labor over time from the individual to the collective.

V. Conclusion

My pursuit to envision a tender and more empathetic world is driven by the notion of image-making as a quest for visibility. Creating imagery through drawing allows for a process in which I am able to rearrange the conditions of the world and visualize a more compassionate version or reflection of ourselves. By giving visual form to feelings, I believe that images can make the world a less menacing and more cooperative place. I want my work to be visually radiant and conceptually optimistic of our own future. The plushy world of *fumblys* is not a vision of a hopeless romantic but is a world of soft, affectionate sensations that exists in protest to the oftentimes unforgiving social structures that we live in.

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