

Strange Being

By

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Abstract

My artistic practice is informed by philosophies of consciousness, existentialism, and personal narrative. My life is experienced through waking and dreaming modes of being. This condition informs the context for the artwork. I am interested in conveying the fluidity of existence through sculpture by using materials freely, such as clay, plaster, and drawing mediums. My exhibition *Strange Being* calls attention to the darkness of my ego, through reflecting on my lived trauma. I will discuss how these ideas informed the Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition as a whole, and through individual artworks.

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I. Introduction

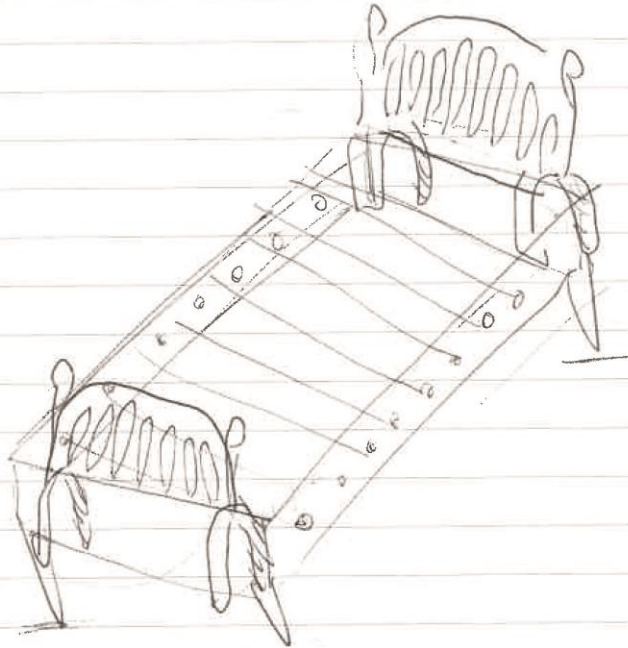
Strange Being is an exhibition that explores personal identity, modes of conscious and unconscious being, and acceptance of self. My traumas haunt me – from feeling robbed of my youth due to sexual coercion, being a military dependent of separated households, and losing a sibling with lack of closure. My personal truths have a dark side that is unsettling, awkward, and difficult to look at. Through the exhibition, the viewer is invited into the vulnerable landscape of my manifested emotion and memory.

There was much inconsistency in living between my parents' households. Traveling between contrasting lifestyles and psychologies left me feeling like an outsider from myself as well as from my family. My practice explores my deep-rooted vulnerabilities without embellishment or apology. I view my identity as a combination of differing perspectives and experiences, coexisting with lived traumas through both consciousness and dreams. Manipulation as an adolescent has been followed by recurring nightmares into adulthood. Research into being, consciousness, and dreams has embodied my purpose as a human being and an artist.

The installation *Strange Being* is composed of twelve multimedia artworks. When entering through the gallery doors, the viewer finds themselves in the center of a landscape of isolated figures and furniture objects. They are arranged in a dimly lit space charged with emotion. The dim light on the artwork gives a sense of eeriness. This landscape is depleted of color to convey memory and thought. Each artwork occupies its own space and even when they are adjacent they appear to be dissociated from the other.

II. Notes from the Dream Journal

a bird flew inside through 7/29
the door.



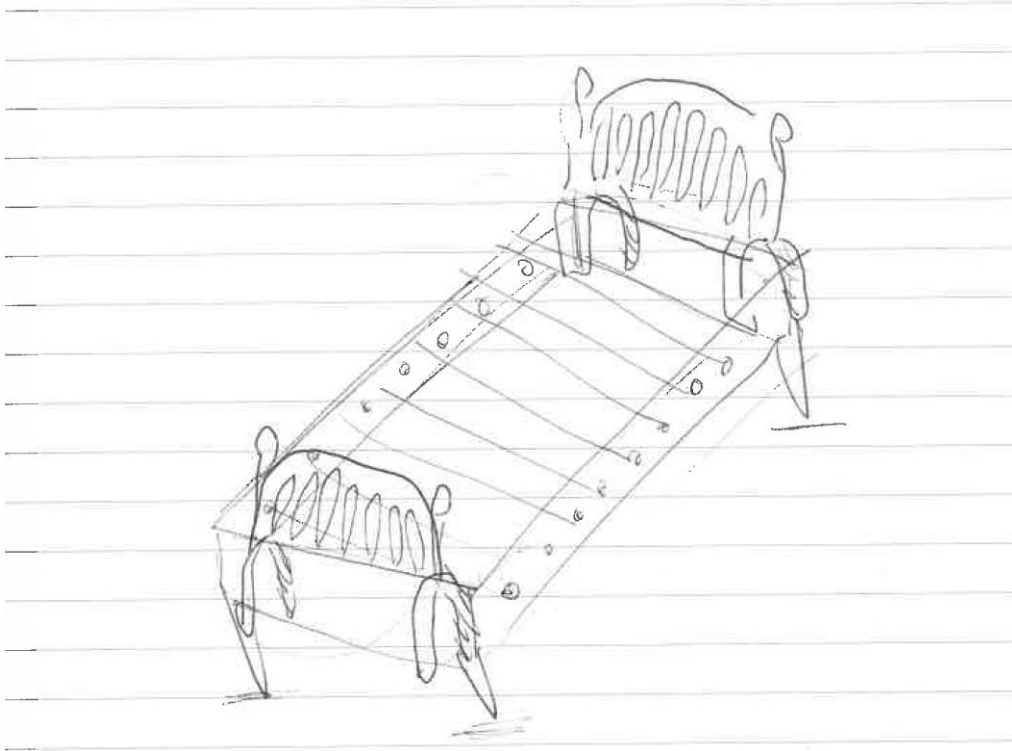
I need to find the
portal.

I'm training. The 2/16/20
mirror is the portal
but I can't access it
yet.

Near dream... Dark sky. 3/8/20
Bag pinned in a bushy.
near water, I get outside
and start flying and look
at the sky. Consistently
change the sky from dark
to light. I go back to the
previous settings.

(transcript of written logs)

A bird flew inside through (7/29)
the door.



I need to find the portal.

I'm training. The
mirror is the portal
but I can't access it
yet.

2/26/20

New dream... Dark sky.
Being pushed in a building
near water. I get outside
and start flying and look
at the sky. Consciously
change the sky from dark
to light. I go back to the
previous setting.

3/8/20

III. Defining States of Being, Dreams, and Art

I consider dreaming as an escape from the physical world, while connecting to parts of our consciousness through confrontation of both fears and desires. Sleep and places of rest, such as beds, act as portals to the unconscious through the lens of the ego. The ego is defined as a combination of memory and lived experience, which subconsciously guides us through waking life. This concept is an obscure part of the self, but one that carries great emotion and feeling. The ego is a part of our mental being that acts as a catch all, from our most joyous to somber moments. While the ego is formed through waking life, it informs the perspective of the dream realm, allowing the dreamer to process the external world from the safety of one's mind.

To be is to interact with both physical and metaphysical worlds through the mind and body. The basis for being, in both waking and sleep, is not singular, but rather a spectrum of modes. The physical body experiences layers of consciousness. When awake, there is awareness of the physical body and how it relates to the surrounding environment. Daydreams occur during the waking state, which begin to transition into less conscious modes of being.

While the body rests, the mind develops narratives based on our waking life. In sleep, the dreamer is guided through the ego. An intersection between sleep and consciousness occurs when the mind becomes lucid, or when the dreamer acknowledges that they are dreaming. Lucidity happens in layers, just as consciousness does in the waking state. One's mind can begin to realize the act of dreaming, while still being disguised by the dream ego. When the mind approaches REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, brain activity is comparable to that of waking consciousness.

While in REM, dreams become more dynamic. Evan Thompson writes “whatever we see or feel [in dreams] seems to exist apart from us with its own being or intrinsic nature. This confused state of mind serves as a model for our waking ignorance of the nature of reality” (174). Thompson is right to point out that dream encounters are experiences in themselves, while connecting to a loose sense of reality. Because dreams are informed by the ego, they are based on reality while being filtered by the mind’s imaginative qualities. The result of a dream is a distorted sense of reality, and not belonging to waking life. In a dream, one can often take on alternative points of view, personalities, or identities. The mind reimagines qualities of waking life to the extent that the self becomes unrecognizable.

Humans are habitual creatures and common themes of waking life are recalled in the subconscious. Since dreams are created through the lens of the ego, recurring themes are a frequent occurrence. These recurring themes may be difficult to reflect on, but by observing lucidly in the dream, or after the dream when awake, this observation becomes more obvious. Recurrence offers comfort – the “I have been here before, this is familiar” – but it also exposes vulnerabilities. Fears and desires of the waking world permeate the subconscious.

Art becomes an extension of being and is capable of describing the ego. In the case of *Strange Being*, art is capable of describing the darkness that the work carries. The art object is like the dream. Neither belong in reality but emerge from it as a unique entity. “...things and states that are not, but ought to be, we yearn to bring into being...” and through artmaking and dreaming, I accomplish this task (Thompson 58). The

absurdities of dreams can be interpreted through artwork when they share the same origin and are true to the creator.

IV. Artmaking as Being

Existentialism has allowed me to reinterpret the world, understand my responsibility, and to release myself from the actions of others. In his lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre explains that everyone has individual choice and consciousness.

“Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence, rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or cauliflower. Prior to that projection of self, nothing exists, not even in divine intelligence, and man shall attain existence only when he is what he projects himself to be - not what he would like to be” (23).

The ability to choose gives oneself the capability to navigate existence, to take responsibility for one's actions, and to reflect on one's being. With autonomy, one's actions and the actions of others can be explained by our decision-making capabilities.

To view a work of art is to bear witness to part of the artist's state of mind and condition of being. In the same way that dreams are formed through the ego, the mind can only contemplate and create works that are relevant to lived experience and memory. Artwork then becomes, at least in part, autobiographical in nature. The philosopher Arturo B. Fallico explains,

“The important thing here is that the artwork does not present what is or is not possible as a felt and imagined possibility, regardless of whether we think it possible in life. Art elements are reminiscent of their source...” (48).

This does not mean that artwork cannot have imaginative qualities, but that the origin of the artwork, the artist, is the core of the artwork. Art asks questions and embodies personal truths that are difficult to describe with words.

The work of an artist is a statement that they are a being in the world, that they choose to exist, and through the making of the artwork, take claim to their being. There are experiences that are difficult to discuss, such as grief, trauma, and pain. While these subjects are personal, there is beauty in making art that embodies raw emotion. Fallico states, “It is through actual being, then, that we understand possible being” (Fallico 8). Visual art needs no words to be impactful, to demonstrate these feelings of being, or connect with the viewer. Through making artwork, we can understand our self. By viewing artwork made by others, we can discover their condition of being.

V. Works

There are twelve individual artworks that make up the installation of *Strange Being*. Here, I will discuss five, including *Boy in Space*, *Wandering in Unison*, *Void*, *Pair of Feet*, and *Hesitant*.



Boy in Space, 2020, ceramic, plaster, underglaze, ink,
dimensions variable, figure is 34" x 13" x 7"

In the gallery, the first artwork that the viewer encounters is *Boy in Space*. A short figure with a striped shirt stands in front of an ink painting that was applied directly to the wall. The figure is the size of a small child. The boy gazes away from the viewer, unaware of being approached. There is room to walk around the figure for further inspection. The face, hair, and his left hand, which is resting on the front leg, are all drawn using underglaze pencil and ink on the ceramic surface. While the top half is ceramic, the bottom half is formed with plaster. The right arm is behind his back to conceal a round marble in the palm of the boy's hand. Behind the figure, a bed frame floats amidst undulating painted lines, repeating in a dreamy vision. The head and foot

boards are front facing and made of ceramic. These are joined by diagonal lines of the white of the wall to complete the structure of a bedframe. The mind rationalizes the front and diagonal perspectives that create two differing points of view, becoming unified.



The Playmate, 1994

While living in Lawrence, Kansas, I have had the pleasure of visiting The National Museum of Toys and Miniatures in Kansas City, Missouri on many occasions. The display above, titled *The Playmate* by Natasha Beshenkovsky, has always intrigued me. There is a girl in a sitting room, where she plays tug-of-war with a cat. The girl, cat, and background are flat, painted chipboard. While other components, such as the yarn used for the tug-of-war, the rocking horse, and desk, are three-dimensional miniatures. There is a dynamic play representing the scene with both two-dimensional images and three-dimensional forms. For example, the girl's arms are painted on and fixed in place,

while an actual miniature ball of yarn sits adjacent on the floor. In her flattened reality she could never pick up an object or ride a rocking horse. What is intriguing, is that these components can simultaneously exist in this invented space, where the viewer can undoubtedly imagine these interactions.



Detail of *Boy in Space*

Boy in Space occupies two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms in similar ways. On the surface of the figure, much of the details are through drawing, such as the shirt, where I've brushed washes of underglaze for the pattern. The face is also only described through using cross hatching and drawn lines on the surface, rather than sculpting. Representing what is visible through different processes shows that the work is multivalent; that not everything that is seen is what is expected. Being and identity are not singular and choosing to represent components of *Boy in Space* and other works turns mental phenomena into physical attributes.



Wandering in Unison, 2021, ceramic, plaster, burlap, wire armature, ink, aqua-resin, approximately 41" x 11" x 7" each, *Void*, 2021, plaster, nylon fiber, fiberglass, ink, and sealant on panel, 4' x 26'

To the left of *Boy in Space*, a grouping of four figures, *Wandering in Unison*, mirror each other. Two light colored figures precede two darker figures. Their arrangement embodies a dual nature of being; the light and darkness that is present in us all and our will to choose. Each is freestanding and rigid. There are no heads or arms, and the viewer can see into the hollowness of the forms. The textures range from smooth and scabby to lumpy, with evidence of swiping motions made with my hand. The torsos are narrowed, as if they are disintegrating. These surfaces show the wear of time, while the hollow and dwindling nature of the forms feels devoid of life. They are destined to wander aimlessly. Behind these figures are three large panels, titled *Void*, to represent the given landscape of *Strange Being*. Sweeping movements in black ink contrast with physical cracks, exposing white plaster underneath. The movements of the ink are meditative, murky, and layered. The cracks become a complex network held together by the nylon fiber, much like connective tissues in the body.



Pair of Feet, 2020, ceramic and underglaze pencil, 9" x 5.25" x 7.5"

Pair of Feet sits quietly like an artifact, rather than actual feet. They are bound together, suggesting lack of mobility or a stationary stance. The ankles begin to taper, as if the form is being diminished. The viewer can see into the hollow form, which makes it feel surreal and lacking life. Uneven ridges catch shadows on the dry surface. While the form has volume, representing a pair of feet as a physical form, the toes are represented differently. Drawn on with an underglaze pencil, the toes instead become an illusitistic visual experience. This combination of sculpted, tangible feet, and drawn, intangible toes, illustrate the fluidity of being. The work represents an isolated, lengthy journey of self, through both conscious and unconscious thought.



Hesitant, 2020, ceramic, plaster, and underglaze pencil, 17" x 12" x 17"

Hesitant is a small figure in a reclining, seated position with one arm carefully outstretched. The body is smooth plaster, lacking descriptive detail, and supports a ceramic head and pair of ceramic hands. Because the body lacks detail, it feels stiff. The head is sculpted and textured, and contrasts greatly with the body. Facial features are gestural and appear worn and withered. The hands both have drawing elements to further describe the forms, such as subtle wrinkles on the fingers and edges of the fingernails.

The plaster of the body becomes cast like and immovable. From the towering vantage point of the viewer, the figure is in a vulnerable state. It feels violated and powerless, and begins to reach out for help, but the moment feels at a pause. *Hesitant* embodies a state of fear-driven paralysis, where the figure is too afraid to choose, and in turn, remains in a vulnerable position without the capacity to react.

VI. Exhibition as Landscape

The landscape of the exhibition *Strange Being* was accomplished through making disparate artworks that could exist within the same otherworldly space. The artworks are unlike beings from our own world, and therefore do not belong anywhere but in this constructed space, much like dreams. While working in the studio, the artworks were crowded and flooded with light. They could not be fully realized until the proper conditions of space and lighting were created in the gallery. As I have been reflecting on the exhibition, it is clear that these elements are essential for viewing and experiencing the artwork.

When entering the gallery, the viewer becomes part of the landscape, standing at the center of this universe. The first visible artwork is *Boy in Space*. There is ample room to approach the installation and to be within its designated space. This is also true of other groupings and disparate works. From the entrance, every artwork in the landscape is visible. Nothing overlaps or distracts from this initial point of viewing.

Some artworks are positioned in relation to others, while others stand alone. In the studio, each artwork was created to be self-contained. In the exhibition, the space around each figure gives a sense of isolation, emptiness, and estrangement. The figures are stagnant, as if we are looking at them in a moment frozen in time. The postures are awkward and uncomfortable, especially in relation to our own bodies. They are still and calcified, paralyzed with fear, but perhaps standing their ground. The surfaces are varied and offer feelings of being weathered by their condition of being. They are smooth and lumpy, revealing other materials in the process and manipulating light with their surfaces and silhouettes. They have no skin or liveliness.

Dramatic lighting is an integral part of the artwork, acting in contrast to the light-colored forms. The overall atmosphere is gloomy and eerie. Through the condition of light, shadows and reflections are revealed. The shadows on the floor are grounding, while the shape becomes distorted from the original form of the artwork. There are shadows on the artworks themselves, often acting in contrast to the white of the plaster or cream of the ceramic. Small gradients reveal depth, continuously describing the shape of the form. Because the condition of light can be manipulated, each installation of the work will differ, depending on what is emphasized.

There are a few pedestals in the landscape that act to elevate specific artworks. The surface of the pedestals is a black, glossy acrylic. The supporting wood frame was ebonized and the woodgrain mimics the white cracks on the wall pieces titled *Void*. Because the surface of the pedestals is dark and glossy, it reflects the artwork that is placed upon it. This reflection, in addition to the shadows, continue to extend how the artwork exists in space, as a metaphor of the extension of being.

The outcome of the landscape *Strange Being* manifests emotion and memory, as a reflection of my own being. The artworks feel remote and distant, allowing the viewer to navigate the quiet landscape with caution. The space and eerie lighting invite introspection; to know my own discomfort and reflect on the viewer's own experience. Vulnerability and carried trauma are emulated throughout the exhibition. They are heavy burdens to bear but are conditions of being human that are inescapable.

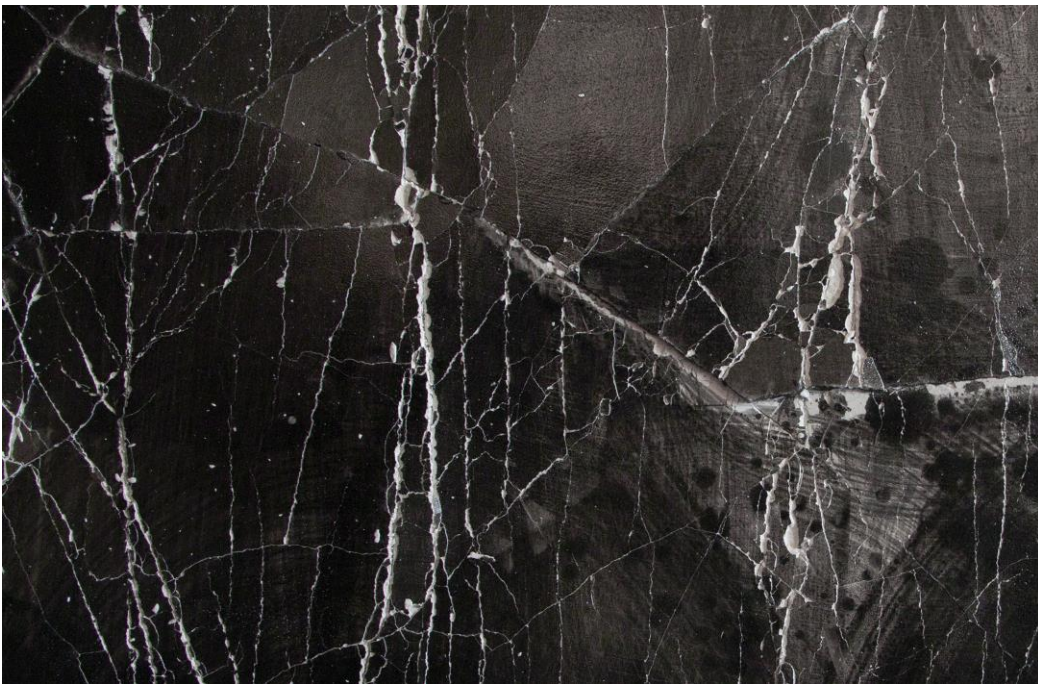
VII. Additional Images

This section includes additional images of the installation *Strange Being*, including individual works and detail images. These images were photographed by Aaron Paden.









Void (and detail) 2021, plaster, nylon fiber, fiberglass, ink, and sealant on panel, 4' x 26'



Boy with Gridded Face (front and back detail), 2020, plaster, wire armature, monoprint and frottage, 23" x 9" x 8" and installation view



Boy in Space, 2020, ceramic, plaster, underglaze, ink,
dimensions variable, figure is 34" x 13" x 7"



Portrait I (right), 2020, plaster monoprint, 11" x 9.5" x 1"
and *Portrait II* (left), 2020, plaster monoprint, 12" x 10" x 1"



Hesitant, 2020, ceramic, plaster, and underglaze pencil, 17" x 12" x 17"



Patiently Waiting, 2021, ceramic, plaster, found object, underglaze pencil, foam,
31" x 16" x 21" and installation view



Bed, 2020, Foam, plaster, wood, 40" x 23" x 37"

Wanderer, 2021, Ceramic, aqua resin, plaster, 31" x 12" x 6"

Void, 2021, plaster, nylon fiber, fiberglass, ink, and sealant on panel, 4' x 8.5"



Aching Pain, 2021, ceramic, plaster, underglaze, graphite, paint, 17" x 10" x 17"



Pair of Feet, 2020, ceramic and underglaze pencil, 9" x 5.25" x 7.5"

VIII. Works Cited

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