Anticipating Combustion: Suffering's Potential For Finding Meaning, Perseverance, And Transcendence

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ANTICIPATING COMBUSTION:
SUFFERING’S POTENTIAL FOR FINDING MEANING, PERSEVERANCE, AND TRANSCENDENCE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

Arising from the complications of an underprivileged and impoverished background this thesis focuses on exposing the grotesque consequences of conflicting ideologies through personal and societal suffering while in search of universal connections to showcase the need for compassion and understanding. My artistic practice is utilized as an entry point to have difficult discussions, a tool for teaching themes of injustice, inequality, and mistreatment. The traumatizing experience of poverty or corruption has the potential to be transmuted into something beneficial. I utilize discarded, low valued, unwanted, and damaged materials in my artmaking to symbolize transfiguration, an advanced state of former self. What seems hideous has its own beauty. What seems rotten and ugly has the potential to be adapted into something beneficial, any suffering we have experienced should not and has not gone to waste. The wisdom and resilience that arose from the experience will serve you in the future. This attempt at an honest, unflinching exploration of self and society is to shift perspectives away from apathy, towards thoughtfulness for other’s struggles.
I am deeply grateful to my thesis committee, whose guidance and support have been instrumental in my academic journey. Firstly, I extend my heartfelt thanks to my thesis chair, Jason Burrell, who has served as a mentor to me since my undergraduate years. Your invaluable advice, unwavering patience, and emphasis on having words to enhance and elevate my work, as well as the organization needed to be a more disciplined student, educator, and individual. Your encouragement to always approach challenges with a well-thought-out plan has been invaluable. I would like to express my gratitude to Carla Poindexter for igniting my passion for painting and challenging my artistic perspectives. Your wise advice has not only invigorated my artistic drive but also helped nurtured my rebellious spirit and deepened my compassion. I have come a long way from our first Intermediate Painting class, thank you for pushing me to explore new artistic horizons all those years ago. Amer Kobaslija, your guidance has been transformative in expanding my understanding of contemporary art and my place in it. Thank you for pushing my understanding of the possibility of material usage in my work. Your mentorship has greatly influenced my studio practice, and I am grateful for the humorous stories that have accompanied your teachings. To Leeann Rae, I am indebted for your constant supply of artistic references, opportunities for growth, and unwavering support. Your guidance has kept me focused and motivated throughout this thesis journey, thanks for having my back.

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THE CONTEMPLATING LARVA

In the intricate tapestry of our societal fabric, systemic inequalities often weave grotesque patterns, casting shadows of anguish upon marginalized groups. Yet, amidst this regrettably real reality of overlooked suffering, lies the fertile ground for artistic exploration and social discourse. My artistic practice emerges as a testament to this endeavor, delving into the grotesque repercussions of systemic injustices, both personal and communal, through the mediums of painting, sculpture, and installation.

At its core, my work serves as a catalyst for challenging dialogues. I confront themes of injustice and inequality that pervade societies collective consciousness Through a wide-ranging selection of materials, often discarded and deemed unworthy; such as old mirrors, obsolete televisions, furniture, metals, clothing, animal byproducts, used footwear, construction waste, I seek to imbue them with new life and meaning, elevating their former states while honoring their history as relics of resilience. What may initially repulse the eye can harbor a profound allure, inviting viewers to confront the uncomfortable truths embedded within our social fabric (Figure 1).

Central to my artistic ethos is the belief that no suffering is in vain; rather, it possesses the transformative power to foster wisdom and resilience. By candidly examining both the self and society, I aspire to catalyze a shift in perspectives, from indifference towards thoughtfulness and understanding of each other's struggles and suffering.
Figure 1: Altagracia Bodega (Underpinning Threshold), Tar, asphalt, building materials, footwear, fabric, ceramic, 108” x 126” x 130”, 2023-2024, Installation photo courtesy of the artist
Early Work

In my thesis body of work, I offer a visual chronicle of the social injustices that I have witnessed and experienced firsthand. One such piece, *Cold, Hard, No Time to Rest* (Figure 2), serves as a reflection of my family's migration from Puerto Rico to pursue the elusive promise of the American dream. Against the backdrop of my personal narrative, I employ a diverse array of materials—used rags to symbolize poverty, second hand mirrors for self-reflection, illumination, and psychological depth, and maggots which are often associated with decay and filth, but also have deeper meaning; as seen in *Business Is Good (Field of Flowers)* (Figures 3-5). They can represent transformation, rebirth, and healing; to evoke a visceral response from the viewer. This is where I began to explore the redeeming qualities that can be found in the grotesque.

Throughout my artistic journey, I draw inspiration from a myriad of influences, among them the works of Anselm Kiefer, whose utilization of authentic materials imbued with history and memory resonates deeply with my own artistic pursuits. Much like Kiefer, I seek to confront the complexities of human experience and societal upheaval, wielding art as a tool for illumination and introspection.

As I embark on this artistic exploration, it is imperative to acknowledge the intertwined nature of personal history and artistic expression. My journey—from ending my 21 year long career as a truck driver while pursuing a higher education, to unearthing and repurposing long repressed memories that form my artistic vision—serves as a testament to the indomitable spirit of resilience and perseverance that underscores my work.

In the pages that follow, I invite you to embark on a journey of introspection, contemplation, and understanding, as we confront the grotesque realities of systemic inequalities and discover the profound beauty that lies within the depths of human suffering.
Figure 2: *Cold, Hard, No Time to Rest*, Acrylic, cotton rags, wood sticks, caution tape on mirror, 50” x 41”, 2020
Figure 3: *Business Is Good (Field of Flowers)*, Acrylic, cotton rags, silver leaf, fly larvae on mirror, 44” x 32”, 2020
Figure 4: Detail of Business Is Good (Field of Flowers)

Figure 5: Detail of Business Is Good (Field of Flowers)
In examining the works of artists who are influential to my work, such as Anselm Kiefer, Vincent Van Gogh, Francis Bacon, and Alberto Giacometti, parallels emerge between their artistic endeavors and my own exploration of present injustices and societal upheaval.
Anselm Kiefer

Anselm Kiefer born 1945 in Germany is a painter that primarily uses paint and found materials from Holocaust concentration camps, World War II era military objects, and industrial materials to expose the use, abuse, and transformation of culture over time caused by the Holocaust. By using authentic materials referencing history and memory, such as straw gathered in the fields outside of concentration camps (Figure 6), it evokes powerful emotions from the audience similar to what I am attempting to do. Kiefer’s commentary on the atrocities of the Holocaust and its enduring ramifications finds resonance in my own examination of present injustices inflicted upon marginalized communities, by a failing system designed to protect our nation. While Kiefer confronts the unsettling nature of past horrors, my work grapples with the chaos and turmoil inherent in contemporary societal and economic structures.

Kiefer's exploration of complex and heavy themes, particularly those related to history, identity, and mythology resonates with me. Throughout his career, Kiefer has delved into the traumas of the past, grappling with the legacy of World War II and the Holocaust, as well as broader questions of cultural memory, shame, and collective consciousness. Similarly, I am drawn to difficult themes of the past and communal connects found through suffering and perseverance. Art can be a powerful platform to engage with and challenge prevailing narratives. Like Kiefer, I seek to confront uncomfortable realities to provoke thought and reflection, I aim to spark meaningful dialogue and introspection.

Kiefer’s artistic process approach shares some commonalities with mine, particularly in his use of unconventional materials and techniques. Kiefer is known for his large-scale mixed-media works, which often incorporate a diverse range of materials such as lead, straw, ash, and even sunflowers. I experiment with discarded materials and found objects, using them symbolically to imbue my work with
layers of meaning and metaphor. By repurposing these materials and giving them new life, I aim to underscore themes of resilience, transformation, and the interconnectedness of all things.

There are notable differences between Kiefer's artistic process and mine. Kiefer's work often reflects a deep engagement with German history and culture, drawing on his own personal experiences and the collective memory of his homeland, my own artistic practice may be more eclectic and inclusive, drawing inspiration from a diverse range of cultural influences and experiences. Kiefer's work tends to be monumental in scale and scope, with a focus on epic themes and grand narratives. My approach is more intimate and introspective, exploring the subtleties of individual experience and emotion with connections to grander narratives. Overall, while there are certainly differences in our approaches and contexts, the spirit of inquiry, experimentation, and commitment to engaging with the complexities of the human condition unite us as artists. Like Kiefer, I aspire to create work that resonates on a profound level, inviting viewers to contemplate the mysteries of existence and their place within the world.

Figure 7: Vincent Van Gogh, Sower, 1888, Oil on canvas, 64x80.5cm, JSTOR, https://jstor.org/stable/community.13612381
Vincent Van Gogh

Vincent Van Gogh born in 1853 in the Netherlands, is a Dutch painter who employed heavy impasto (thick layers of paint) similar to myself. The bright, vibrant hues, pure hues in his pallet such as lemon yellow, Prussian or ultramarine blue, gives the impression of an idealized landscape. In contrast, I use a similar pallet to create a toxic atmosphere with unsettling undertones. Van Gogh shares his idealized vision of labor workers (Figure 7) or depressed prisoners, where as I highlight the narratives of overlooked impoverish members of my community, family and friends (Figure 8).

In terms of artistic process, Van Gogh's approach offers both similarities and differences to my own. Van Gogh was known for his bold use of color and expressive brushwork, capturing the essence of his subjects with vibrant intensity. His paintings often convey a sense of emotional depth and raw authenticity, inviting viewers to experience the world through his eyes. I share Van Gogh's passion for expressive brushstrokes and emotive storytelling, my artistic process has a greater emphasis on conceptualization and material experimentation. I draw inspiration from a diverse range of sources, incorporating elements of symbolism, narrative, and cultural commentary into my work. Additionally, I may explore unconventional materials and techniques to bring my artistic vision to life, seeking to challenge traditional notions of artistry and representation.
Figure 8: *Consequences*, Acrylic, newspaper pulp, screws, nails on canvas, 2020
Francis Bacon

The painter Francis Bacon, born in 1909 in Ireland—was known for his visceral and emotionally charged paintings. His art often delved into the darker aspects of human existence, exploring themes of existentialism, violence, and the human condition. Bacon's works are characterized by distorted, contorted figures that convey a sense of anguish and torment, often depicted within claustrophobic and oppressive spaces. His use of bold brushwork and dramatic lighting adds to the intensity of his compositions, creating a sense of raw emotion and psychological depth. Bacon's bold exploration of personal history and identity through expressive brushstrokes and haunting imagery serves as a parallel to my own endeavors in conveying the emotion and turmoil of present-day injustices.

Bacon employs a muted palette to establish a dark mood (Figure 9), I utilize a wider range of colors to evoke a visceral reaction from my audience (Figure 10). Bacon invites viewers to confront uncomfortable truths, such as Figure with Meat, a portrait of Pope Innocent X. In this powerful and unsettling work, Bacon draws from Diego Velázquez's iconic Portrait of Pope Innocent X (c. 1650). The screaming Pope between bisected cattle carcasses evoke themes of mortality and decay, transforming Velázquez's dignified composition into a nightmarish image. Bacon's Pope can be seen as a depraved butcher or as much a victim, like the slaughtered animal behind him; a testament to his papacy that was marred by controversy, violence, suspicions of impropriety, and cunning political maneuvering. This painting invites contemplation on power, suffering, and the fragility of life; challenging our perceptions of authority and vulnerability.
Figure 9: Francis Bacon, *Figure with Meat*, Oil on canvas, 51” x 48”, 1954, The Art Institute of Chicago, Harriott A. Fox Fund, JSTOR, https://jstor.org/stable/community.22758052.
Bacon's work tends to focus on the individual psyche and existential angst, my artist practice is concerned with broader societal issues and the collective human experience of suffering. We both employ expressive, emotive imagery to convey the emotional weight of our subject matter, albeit with different context. Bacon led a tumultuous life with personal struggles and complex relationships. His upbringing in early 20th-century Ireland, his sexuality, and living through the horrors of World War II profoundly influenced his art. In contrast, I use my personal experiences with economic oppression, racial bias, inner-city violence, and corruption to expose the need to highlight underrepresented narratives and communities to enrich dialogue within the broader artistic community and beyond.
Alberto Giacometti

Alberto Giacometti born in 1901 was a Swiss sculpture, painter, and draftsman that worked primarily in Paris, France. Giacometti is known as one of the most important sculptures of the 20th century. His busts in particular are the most influential to me. Giacometti’s innovative approach to capturing the essence of the human form through quick manipulation and casting techniques resonates deeply with my own exploration of three-dimensional aspects within my work. While Giacometti works from observation, I draw from memory, utilizing silicone molds to cast figures in various materials such as bronze, stainless steel, with the shared objective of capturing the essence of the people we depict.

Giacometti’s sculptures, characterized by their elongated, diminished figures (Figure 11), capture the essence of the human form in a raw and visceral manner, conveying a sense of existentialism and isolation. Similarly, I am interested in probing questions of identity, agency, and vulnerability (Figure 12). I aim to depict the complexities of human emotion, interpersonal relationships, drawing viewers into a dialogue of the universal aspects of the human condition. Giacometti’s work tends to focus on the individual figure, often in isolation, as do mine; however, my practice encompass a broader range of subjects and themes, including social, economic, and political concerns with cultural ramification.

Giacometti’s sculptures are celebrated for their austerity and restraint, my own work is more eclectic and experimental, incorporating a diverse range of materials, techniques, and styles. We both wrestle with questions of form and representation, embracing ambiguity, abstraction, and improvisation as integral aspects of my artistic practice. Like Giacometti, I aspire to create work that resonates on a profound level, inviting viewers to contemplate the complexities of existence and the enduring mysteries of the human soul. As I continue to navigate the complexities of my own artistic practice, I draw inspiration from these luminaries, utilizing their insights and techniques to emphasize the pressing issues of our time and foster meaningful dialogue and introspection.
Figure 11: Alberto Giacometti, *Tête (Bust of Diego)*, 1957, Bronze, 24 ½” x 10” x 6 ½”, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Fractional purchase and bequest of Phyllis Wattis, JSTOR, https://jstor.org/stable/community.14719823.
Figure 12: You’ll Get Your Comeuppance, Copper, resin, wax, 4” x 5.5” x 3”, 2021
PROCESS OF TRANSFIGURATION

My body of work entitled headspace (Figures 13 & 14) is a series of miniature heads and busts influenced by my lived experience and the work of Giacometti. These sculptures, designed to fit in one's hand, compel intimate engagement from viewers due to their scale. Here, I delineate the intricate process through which these miniatures are created, employing a mold-making technique to bring them to life.

Figure 13: Head Space, Bronze, brass, copper, stainless steel, iron, wood, concrete, hydrostone, resin, 120” x 120” x 8”, 2022-2024
Mold-Making Miniatures

The initial step in the mold-making process involves sculpting the miniature heads out of Plastilina Modeling Clay (oil-based clay). This type of clay offers the advantage of remaining malleable indefinitely, ensuring flexibility during the molding process. Once sculpted, the miniature heads are placed on temporary stands in preparation for the subsequent stages of mold-making (Figure 15).

To create the negative of the sculpted heads, silicone rubber is meticulously applied layer by layer. This process requires at least four layers of silicone to ensure a sufficient thickness (Figure 16),
ranging from a quarter to half an inch, allowing for safe removal of the cast without tearing.

Subsequently, a clay wall is built around the silicone mold; marking the commencement of the two-part mother mold process. The function of the mother mold is crucial, as it stabilizes the silicone mold, preventing distortion during and after casting. Upon completing the mother mold, plaster is poured into a plastic container, facilitated by the custom-built box designed to prevent seepage. The plaster is poured in two pieces to avoid collapsing the box and ensure a seamless mold (see Figure 17). Once dried, the completed mold is coated with wax to facilitate easy separation of the two halves.
Figure 15: Process photo, courtesy of the artist
Figure 16: Process photo, courtesy of the artist
Figure 17: Process photo, courtesy of the artist
The culmination of the mold making process is exemplified in the creation of *A Tongue Like Razor Devises Destruction* (see Figure 18). This miniature was cast in concrete, utilizing one of the molds crafted for this purpose. Once the concrete had fully cured and dried, it underwent a transformative process to elevate its visual impact. Multiple layers of acrylic washes were delicately applied to the surface, highlighting and revealing the intricate form of the sculpture. To further enhance its aesthetic depth, an application of black wax saturated the entirety of the sculpture and allowed to hardened. Then it was polished with a cloth towel, resulting in the removal of excess wax from the elevated surfaces while preserving its presence within the recessed grooves. This laboring technique yielded a striking contrast between the high and low areas of the sculpture, enhancing its overall visual texture, complexity, and the hand of the artist (including fingerprints, nail scratches, and tool marks).

Throughout the creation of *A Tongue Like Razor Devises Destruction* and other miniature heads, concrete and hydrostone emerged as the primary materials for casting. Post-curing, these sculptures underwent a similar treatment, with multiple layers of acrylic washes carefully applied to accentuate their intricate details. The application of black wax served as a final touch, carefully applied and polished to accentuate the sculptural nuances while maintaining a distinct contrast between the raised and recessed areas.

In essence, this process exemplifies the craftsmanship and attention to detail inherent in the creation of each miniature head sculpture, resulting in visually compelling artworks that evoke contemplation from and engagement with the viewer.
Figure 18: A Tongue Like Razor Devises Destruction, Concrete, pigment, wax, 4” x 3” x 3”, 2022
Life-Sized Ceramic Heads

In addition to the miniature heads, I also work into the field of ceramics; life-sized sculptures capturing the essence and narratives behind each individual depicted (Figure 19). Unlike the mold-making process for the Head Space installation, working with ceramics necessitates careful consideration of hydration and moisture control in relation to complications during kiln firings.

Figure 19: Detail of Altagracia Bodega (Underpinning Threshold)
The ceramic sculptures undergo a painstaking process that involves being cut open into sections (Figure 20), hollowed out, and reassembled (Figure 21); followed by a bisque firing to prepare them for the application of underglaze. The bisque firing hardens the clay and makes it porous, allowing the underglaze to be absorbed into the hardened clay. Once the sculpture has dried for a day or two, a final firing to bond the underglaze to the clay resulting in vibrant, life-size ceramic heads (Figure 22).

Figure 20: Process photo of Thy Name is No One, courtesy of the artist
Figure 21: Process photo of Thy Name is No One, courtesy of the artist
Furthermore, my artistic practice extends beyond traditional two-dimensional paintings, as exemplified by the triptych entitled *Now You’re Under Control* (Figure 23). Constructed from low-grade OSB board, flawed lumber, acrylic gesso, and fire, these structures represent a fusion of painting and
sculpture. The process of burning not only strengthens the wood, it symbolizes purification, rebirth, creation, and much more; embodying the theme of perseverance inherent within the narrative of my upbringing in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Through these intricate processes, my artistic practice serves as a testament to resilience, perseverance, and the transformative power of creative expression in confronting societal injustices and exploring the depths of human experience.

Figure 23: *Now You’re Under Control*, Acrylic gesso, charcoal on burned OSB board, 54” x 28”, 48” x 24”, 48” x 24”, 2022
Figure 24: Process photo of *Now You’re Under Control*, courtesy of the artist

Figure 25: Detail of *Now You’re Under Control*
ROOTS AND SPIRITS

In the emerging field of Epigenetics, groundbreaking research illuminates the profound impact of environmental influences and trauma on gene expression, ushering in a paradigm shift known as Generational Trauma.¹ This phenomenon, wherein chemical marks alter gene expression and can be transmitted across generations, has captivated my interest, particularly as it pertains to my own ancestral lineage and the rich tapestry of cultures that comprise Puerto Rican identity.

Within the mixed heritage of Puerto Rican people, encompassing the Indigenous Caribbean Taino tribe, African descendants, and European settlers, I discerned striking parallels and shared narratives. Our collective history is woven with threads of power dynamics, violence, subjugation, and resilience, alongside a deep-seated reverence for spirituality and mythology.² In examining the intersection of religion and science, it becomes evident that while science focuses on uncovering truths about the present or past, religion often directs its gaze towards the future, offering hope and salvation. Essential to human existence, hope stands as a quintessential virtue, crucial for our collective well-being. As religions serve as sciences of hope, they provide frameworks for purpose, values, and meaning in our lives. Thus, acknowledging and integrating these systems of hope and salvation is imperative, recognizing their equal value alongside scientific inquiry.³

Of particular significance to my artistic exploration are the material practices of African and Taino tribes. Both cultures revered rocks, wood, clay, metals, fibers, and earth pigments, utilizing

whatever materials were readily available to honor their ancestors, community, and spiritual deities. These deities served as conduits between the human realm and the metaphysical, embodying sacred and profane aspects of existence.

Researching these shared material traditions and spiritual connections, compelled me to investigate the enduring legacies of resilience and reverence that have shaped Puerto Rican culture. Through my artistic practice, I seek to amplify these ancestral voices, honoring their wisdom and fortitude while exploring the intricate interplay between past traumas and present realities.

Throughout my journey, I have cultivated a diverse belief system that draws from a multitude of sources, spanning from my Catholic upbringing to the wisdom of East Asian religions, the enigmatic allure of the occult, the timeless tales of mythology, and even the perspective of atheism. This eclectic fusion mirrors the rich tapestry of cultural and spiritual diversity found in both the United States and Puerto Rico, where people from all walks of life converge, bringing with them their unique traditions and perspectives.

Despite the apparent differences in our outward appearances, I have come to recognize a deeper interconnectedness that binds us together, a cosmic tapestry woven with invisible threads of energy, linking mankind, nature, and the universe itself. This inexplicable force, akin to an omnipresent bonding energy or framework, fascinates me deeply.

In contemplating this interconnectedness, I am reminded of the first law of Thermodynamics, which asserts that energy cannot be created or destroyed; it can only change forms. This notion prompts me to ponder: Can we tap into the energy of the past, invoke the spirits of the deceased, or transmute the negativity of traumatic events to reshape our reality, reclaim forgotten truths, and infuse our lives with renewed meaning?
Driven by this inquiry, I embark on a quest to materialize the invisible, to give form to the intangible forces that shape our existence. Through my artistic endeavors, I aspire to channel these energies, harnessing their transformative potential to illuminate the hidden truths of our shared human experience and transcend the confines of the tangible world.

The quest to manifest the unseen energy into our tangible reality and imbue physical objects with memories and history has long intrigued me. Recently, while wandering through the African section of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, I stumbled upon a profound revelation. Standing before the 19th-century Kongo Power Figure (similar to the sculpture of Figure 26), I felt an inexplicable presence, a tangible atmosphere that transcended the boundaries of the physical object. It was as if the Power Figure possessed a life force of its own, resonating with an otherworldly energy that Walter Benjamin famously termed Aura.4

In delving into the ritualistic practices of the Kongo people behind the creation of these Power Figures, I uncovered a fascinating process. Shamans would invoke the energy of their ancestors or deities, infusing it into the object to inspire its creation. This ritual imbued the Power Figure with a palpable sense of presence, an embodiment of the spiritual realm in physical form.

This encounter with the Kongo Power Figure led me to reflect on contemporary Western artworks that similarly evoke a sense of possession or haunting. Artists like Anselm Kiefer and Francis Bacon masterfully harness the power of expressive brushstrokes and material manipulation to imbue their creations with an ineffable energy and emotion. Their works resonate with a supernatural-like quality, a sense of being inhabited by unseen forces.

Inspired by these discoveries and fueled by my own experiences and heritage, I am emboldened
to forge my own path in the realm of art. I aspire to create works that transcend the ordinary, channeling
the unseen energies of the past into the present, channeling them into tangible forms that speak to the
depths of human existence (Figure 27). I work quickly like a demon, fast and ferociously, there is no time
to think. The mind is the enemy in those short, fleeting moments; let the energy flow, just create.
Figure 27: Clairvoyant, Acrylic, paper pulp, screws, nail, wax on canvas, 10” x 10”, 2020
INJUSTICE IN AMERICA

Addressing the pervasive injustice entrenched within America serves as a driving force behind my artistic endeavors, stemming from both personal experiences and observations gleaned from media narratives.

Figure 28: Scars and Stripes, Burlap, tar paper, bullet casings, silicone, sutures, 144” x 72”, 2022
The glaring reality of racial injustice in America, particularly the systematic abuse inflicted upon black and brown individuals by a system purportedly designed to protect us, imbues my work with a sense of urgency and purpose.
The harrowing statistics surrounding police violence in the United States underscore the magnitude of the systemic crisis plaguing our nation.\(^5\) With at least 1,232 people killed by law enforcement in the deadliest year for homicides in over a decade.\(^6\)

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These figures paint a stark picture of a deeply entrenched pattern of brutality and disregard for human life.

Figure 31: *Blacktop In The Sky*, OSB board, footwear, cinder blocks, tar, asphalt, concrete, ceramic, 96” x 70” x 24”, 2023
Mapping Police Violence, a nonprofit research group, catalogues these deaths, reveals a distressingly consistent pattern of abuse of power and impunity with on average three people killed daily by police. Who will be the next three victims of police brutality today? Figures 28-32 are artworks that represent, are inspired by, and/or memorialize the people affected by these staggering statistics of negligence and bias.

Figure 32: Who’s Next?, Ink, fingerprints, gunpower, bullet holes on paper, 30” x 22” each, 2022

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Mass Negligence

My first installation, *Mass Negligence* (Figure 33), was inspired by a tragic incident in Kissimmee, FL, where several Osceola County Deputy Sheriffs fatally shot Jayden Baez, a 20-year-old, and wounded Michael Gomez, Joseph Lowe, and Ian Joi, over allegations of stealing Pokémon cards and pizza.\(^8\) Constructing a coffin using humble materials such as OSB board, lumber, trash bags, and Pokémon bedding, I sought to symbolize the callous disregard for human life epitomized by the Sherriff Deputies' casual dismissal of Jayden's existence. The resonance of this narrative with my own lived experiences, lends a gripping authenticity to my artistic expression. The dilapidated state of these neighborhoods serves as a stark reminder of the systemic neglect and despair endemic within marginalized communities.

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Figure 33: Mass Negligence, Burned, damaged, flawed lumber, OSB board, trash bags, cinderblocks, plastic American flag, 76” x 36” x 60”, 2022
Figure 34: Detail of *Mass Negligence*

Figure 35: Detail of *Mass Negligence*
The Minute of Decay

Drawing upon personal anecdotes from my upbringing, I share stories to reveal the pervasive cycle of despair and injustice that plagues disenfranchised individuals. From a friend driven to suicide by the relentless onslaught of hopelessness and incarceration to a corrupt official ultimately meeting a grim fate, these narratives underscore the harsh realities faced by many within these communities. Central to my exploration of injustice in America is the figure of the mother, symbolizing order amidst chaos and offering solace to those engulfed by societal decay. Within my portion of the Head Space exhibition, the miniature portrayal of the mother serves as a guiding light, offering a semblance of refuge amidst the brokenness and despair.

Among the array of miniatures showcased in the Head Space series, Drowning Slowly (Figure 36) encapsulates a distressing narrative of despair and hopelessness. It depicts a friend caught in the grips of emotional turmoil that tragically succumbed to the weight of their struggles. Haunted by their circumstances, the absence of familial support, a lack of meaningful connections, this individual navigated a bleak existence marked by perpetual dead-end jobs and the inescapable sense of aimlessness. Their daily existence was a relentless cycle of despair, with no relief from the suffocating grip of poverty. I knew there was something wrong with them the night before they committed suicide. Their decision, serves as a stark reminder of the profound toll that untreated mental anguish can exact. She just had enough of the hopeless situation. Drowning Slowly is a sobering reflection on the enduring impact of mental health struggles within our communities.
As I navigate the complex interplay of social structures and individual narratives, my artistic practice serves as a reflection of the inequities and injustices pervading America. Through creative expression and storytelling, I endeavor to shed light on the untold stories of those marginalized and disenfranchised, fostering empathy and understanding in the face of neglect and indifference.

Figure 36: Drowning Slowly, Pigmented hydrostone, wax, 3.5” x 4.5” x 3”, 2022
ELEVATING THE GROTESQUE

The genesis of *Altagracia Bodega* finds its roots in my lived experiences and the profound impact of Pepón Osorio’s installation *Badge of Honor* (Figure 37). While Osorio’s work typically embodies themes of masculinity, boyhood, and maximalism, *Badge of Honor* distinguishes itself by delving into themes of injustice and incarceration, encapsulated within two distinct rooms. In the left room, a projection depicts a father’s poignant recounting of the day his child was born from his prison cell, offering a raw and intimate glimpse into the complexities of fatherhood amidst incarceration. Concurrently, a recreation of the jail cell stands as a stark reminder of the harsh realities faced by those ensnared within the criminal justice system. On the right, a maximalist rendition of the child’s memory of his father’s room juxtaposes idealized imagery with the harsh reality of absence and longing (Figure 38).

Figure 37: Pepón Osorio, *Badge of Honor*, Multi-media installation, Size variable, Permanently on display at MoMA, NY, 1995, Photo courtesy of Leeann Rae
Figure 38: Pepón Osorio, Badge of Honor, Multi-media installation, Size variable, Permanently on display at MoMA, NY, 1995, Photo courtesy of Leeann Rae
Altagracia

Inspired by Osorio’s maximalist approach and his ability to speak to the experiences of the oppressed, I sought to channel similar themes within my own creation, Altagracia Bodega. However, rather than idolizing or idealizing these narratives, I opted to confront them head-on, delving into the grotesque realities obscured by social barriers. The boarded-up, condemned exterior of Altagracia Bodega (Figure 39) is as a symbolic barrier, concealing the unsightly objects within (Figure 40); a stark contrast to the whitewashed narratives often perpetuated by society. Personal items, immersed with tar, asphalt, and concrete, lie within, evoking a sense of decay, neglect, strength, and cruelty. The hanging footwear, reminiscent of the ones you would see dangling from powerlines are memorials to the recently deceased, in addition to being a signal indicating drugs are available for purchased, or a marker designating you are entering a gangs’ territory.

Figure 39: Altagracia Bodega (Underpinning Threshold), Tar, asphalt, building materials, footwear, fabric, ceramic, 108” x 126” x 130”, 2023-2024, Installation photograph courtesy of the artist
Figure 40: Interior detail of Altagracia Bodega (Underpinning Threshold), Photograph courtesy of the artist
Underpinning

Through the process of underpinning, typically employed to rectify damaged foundations, I seek to lift and elevate Altagracia Bodega (Figure 41). Despite its flaws and the stigmas attached to the communities in which such establishments reside; the bodega remains an integral part of our community—a bastion of nourishment and culture amidst adversity. The very name Altagracia, meaning "High Grace" in Spanish, invokes the protective and spiritual connotations associated with the Virgin Mary, underscoring the significance of this communal space.

Figure 41: Foundation detail of Altagracia Bodega (Underpinning Threshold)
Photograph courtesy of the artist
Threshold

In my installation *Altagracia Bodega*, I aim to transcend conventional narratives and highlight the resilience and grace inherent within marginalized communities. By confronting the grotesque realities obscured by societal barriers, I endeavor to foster empathy, understanding, and a deeper appreciation for the complexities of urban life. Its creation was a laborious yet deliberate process, meticulously designed to encapsulate the stark realities of urban life and the resilience of marginalized communities. This monstrosity, as I fondly refer to it, was crafted with the intention of being easily broken down into manageable pieces for handling, delivery, and assembly, allowing for both practicality and symbolism in its construction.

The incorporation of drywall panels with strategically placed holes, mimicking windows, served not only to lighten the structural load but also to invite natural light into the space, symbolizing hope amidst adversity. Assembling the walls and anchoring them to the foundation marked a pivotal moment in the installation process, suggesting the physical manifestation of resilience and stability within the community. Central to the narrative of *Altagracia Bodega* are the OSB board and footwear, serving as tangible reminders of the barriers holding back impoverished communities; a visual testament to the lost souls and untold stories that remain obscured by broad economic oppression and neglect. The accompanying *Head Space* wall installation, comprising over 100 shelves, juxtaposes store-bought and handmade elements to create a sharp contrast between pristine white surfaces and flawed, burnt counterparts, manifesting the complexities of urban life, communal decay, uncertain futures, and chaos.
Altagracia Bodega stands as an architectural ghost, embodying dualistic qualities of holiness and unholiness within the context of my thesis. Its essence evokes a sense of sacredness and profanity simultaneously, serving as a symbolic representation of the complexities and contradictions inherent within all human being as well as marginalized urban landscapes. On one hand, the bodega transcends physical form, becoming a sacred space imbued with spiritual significance. Named Altagracia, meaning "High Grace" in Spanish, it invokes the protective and spiritual connotations associated with the Virgin Mary. In this sense, the bodega becomes a sanctuary—a place of nourishment, culture, and communal connection amidst the adversity and decay of the urban environment.

However, juxtaposed against this aura of sanctity is the bodega's unholy aspect, manifesting in its dilapidated exterior and the grotesque objects contained within. The boarded-up, condemned façade serves as a barrier, concealing the unsightly artifacts of societal neglect; personal items saturated with tar, asphalt, and concrete. These remnants of decay and despair stand as haunting reminders of the systemic injustices and marginalization faced by the community.

My thesis has been an exploration into the grotesque repercussions of inequality and injustice, revealing the often-overlooked narratives of marginalized groups. As I navigate through these complexities in my artistic practice, my aim is not only to amplify muffled voices but conjointly cultivate rational compassion, foster contemplation, consideration, and inspire a deeper understanding of each other's struggles and suffering.

In this pursuit, I am reminded of the insightful teachings of Viktor Frankl in his book, Man's Search for Meaning. Frankl, a Holocaust concentration camp survivor whose family was killed while incarcerated, proposes that finding meaning in life, even in the face of adversity, is essential for human flourishing. Similarly, my work seeks to uncover and convey the inherent meaning within the experiences
of those affected by inequality, inviting viewers to confront uncomfortable truths and contemplate the significance of their own existence. Frankl emphasizes the importance of self-transcendence, the act of looking beyond oneself and connecting with something greater. In sharing the stories and experiences of marginalized communities, I aspire to facilitate moments of self-transcendence for both myself and my audience, transcending individual perspectives to embrace a collective humanity.

As I look towards the future, I am committed to continuing my artistic practice as both a creator and educator. Through exhibitions, teaching, and advocacy efforts, I will strive to elevate these important narratives and contribute to meaningful change at the collegiate level and beyond. By remaining steadfast in my dedication to exposing harsh realities and utilizing art as a tool for change and understanding; I hope to play a role in shaping a more compassionate, equitable community.

Figure 42: Shared Pathos, Stainless steel, 4" x 3" x 2", 2023

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LIST OF REFERENCES


