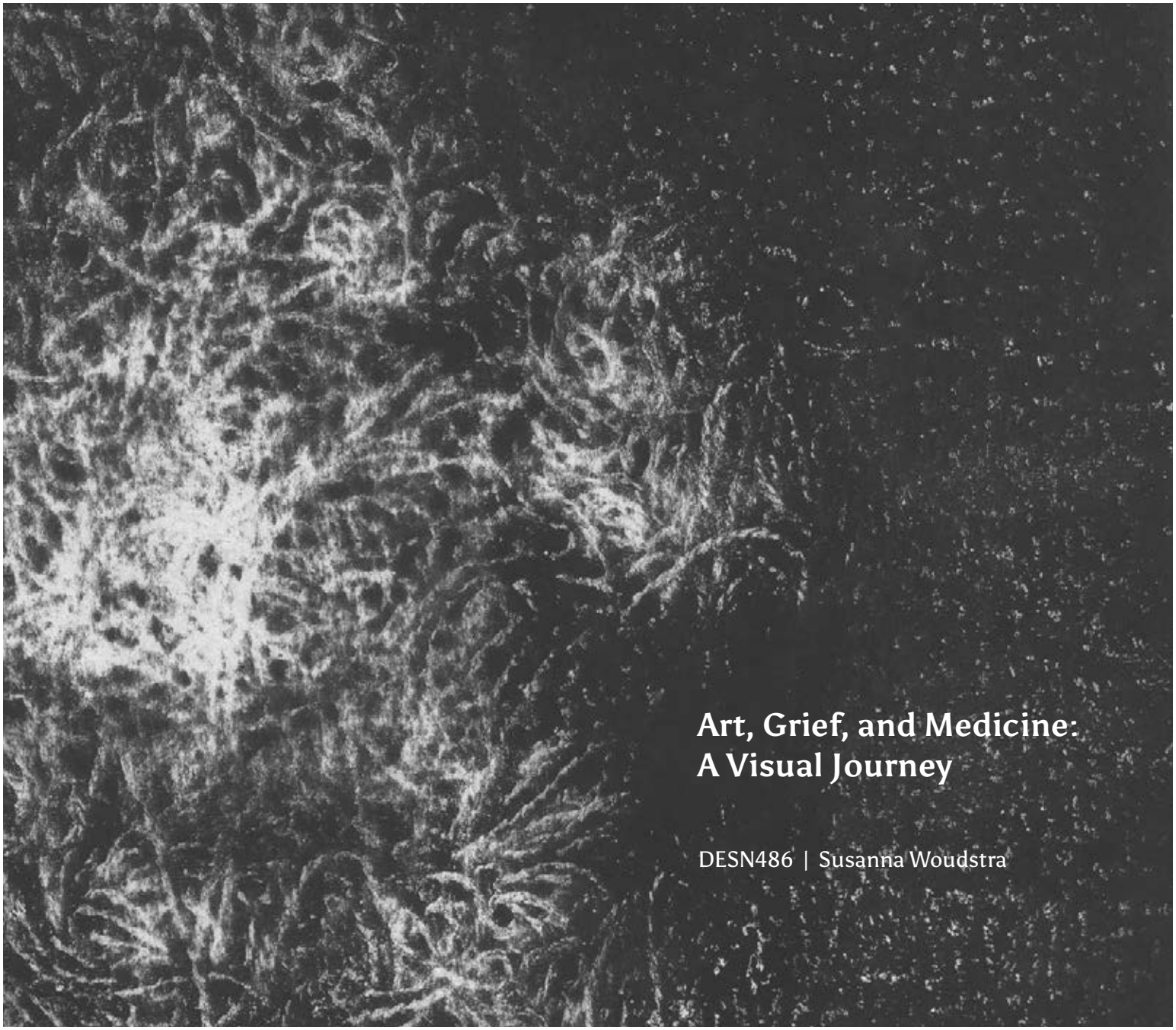


Art, Grief, and Medicine: A Visual Journey

DESN486 | Susanna Woudstra



Introduction:

This project explores the interconnection between a person's experience of receiving a medical diagnosis and the role that art, as a form of emotional exploration and expression, can serve to benefit the individual. Art can serve as a medium of catharsis, self-understanding, and self-expression during the processing period of a life change. My research and work also aim to show how art as a method of emotional communication can help generate empathy for those in the midst of such a life-altering event and make them feel less isolated.

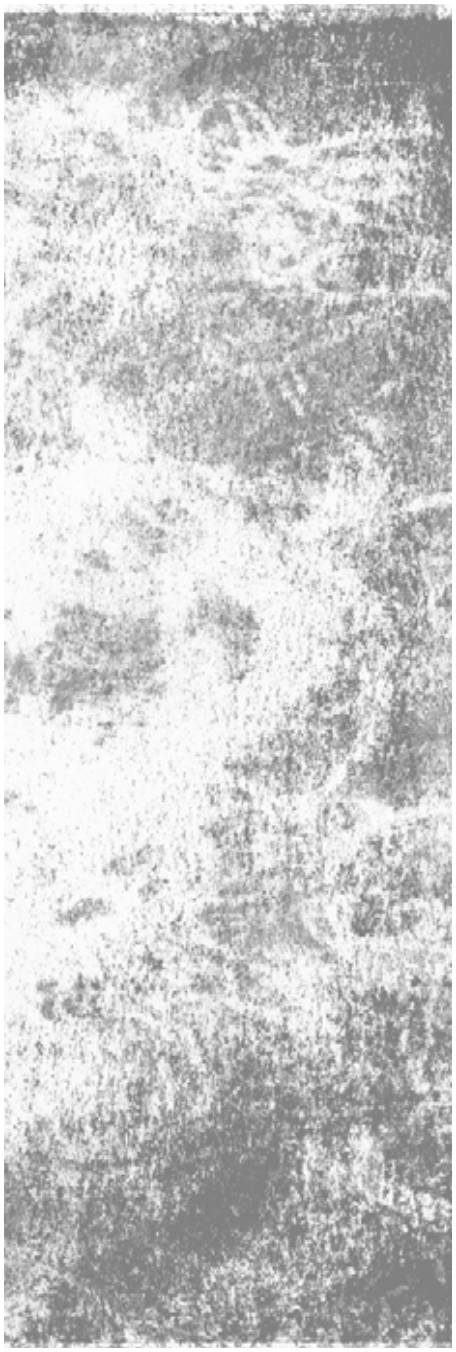
Audience:

Most people will experience a medical confrontation at some point in their lives, and it can be an emotionally challenging time. This project hopes to connect not just with anyone who has experienced such a change in their life, but also with the people around them who might seek to better understand how to support others. Adults of all ages might benefit and learn from reading about someone else's experience with such a challenging event, and gain a greater sense of empathy for those around them. A person experiencing similar emotions might feel less alone and could be inspired to create their own art as a method of catharsis and reinterpretation.

A secondary audience might be medical professionals seeking to gain a better understanding of the emotional experience of their patients who receive life-affecting diagnoses.

Goals:

- Learn about the impact that art can have on people experiencing medical diagnoses.
- Gain an understanding of the methods of creating that communicate emotion.
- Experience making art and a finished product that shares the experience of complex and challenging internal processing.
- Create a product that generates empathy and reflection into the experience of a life-changing event.



Literature Review:

The world of medicine and art are seen as opposites, but they can, in fact, strongly affect each other. Art so often portrays the highs and lows in life, often contemplating death and life itself, a matter that medicine is oriented toward at its core. Historically, we have kept these domains separate when there is an opportunity for mutual benefit. Art has always served to connect with others, portraying complex emotion and being an act of catharsis. This is often where medical fields fall short, and fail to understand the psychological and emotional toll of medical challenges, and may be an opportunity to improve understanding of patients' pain, emotions, and comprehension of their diagnosis (Bloem, 2018). Modernly, the medical field tends to objectify the body as if it were a broken machine to be fixed, and alienates the mind and emotion from medical care (Bolaki, 2020). Art offers a way to come to grips with the ambiguity of the lived experience, to examine sensitive emotions by giving them physical form, and to communicate to others feelings that would be impossible to put into words. As Bhalla says, the act of putting emotions to paper can allow oneself to create distance from tough feelings or thoughts and make it feel "like a safe place to explore personal memories" (2025). The artists' book is an example of this often intimate expression of thought and experience. A unique feature of the artists' book is its ability to engage the reader as much as the artist themself through the interaction and interpretation of the reader (Bolaki, 2020). It is a personal exchange, from artist to reader, to touch the same paper, to hold the item, to turn the pages, to share emotion in a visual medium. The artists' book serves to connect people, to offer a glimpse into the internal, vulnerable, and emotional mind of one person and share it with others. It creates a shared experience, a sense of empathy, a community, and a collective care and strength.

> "Being treated for a serious disease inevitably raises questions about life, death, and the meaning of it all. Ignoring these questions is unnatural and helps neither the cure nor the care. Art is a way of confronting them, as it has dealt with the deeper questions of life for millenniums." (Bloem, 2018, 2)

Design Methods/ Process:

READING:

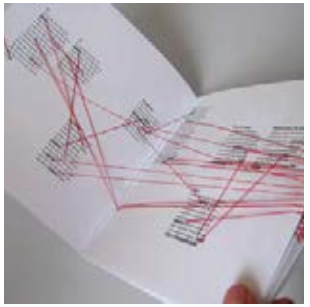
I began by researching what the artist book actually was. I've seen many and been drawn to the rough, handmade, emotional and experiential nature of the book, but didn't fully understand the purpose of them. After reading articles from Bolaki (2020) and Bloem (2018), I had a stronger understanding of the unique nature of the artist book to connect with the audience, and a greater drive to create something that could do just that.

INSPIRATION:

I gathered many pieces of imagery showing handmade art, textile work, and artists' books to guide the visual style of my work, and to give a starting point for my own art exploration.








BEGINNING TACTILE WORK:

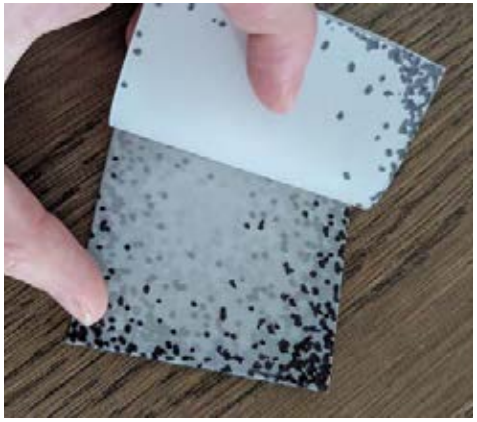
I hopped right into making tactile pieces that felt cathartic. I referenced my inspiration images and made my own version, but found that while it was an entry point to making the visuals for the end product, the pieces lacked connection to each other and felt singular.

WRITING:

I found myself lacking narrative direction and was only making for the sake of it, but without any story to drive it. I spent a couple of days just writing the chronological points of the story, recalling the emotions I experienced at the time, and then annotating visual descriptions that might fit.











AUTOMATIC MARKMAKING:

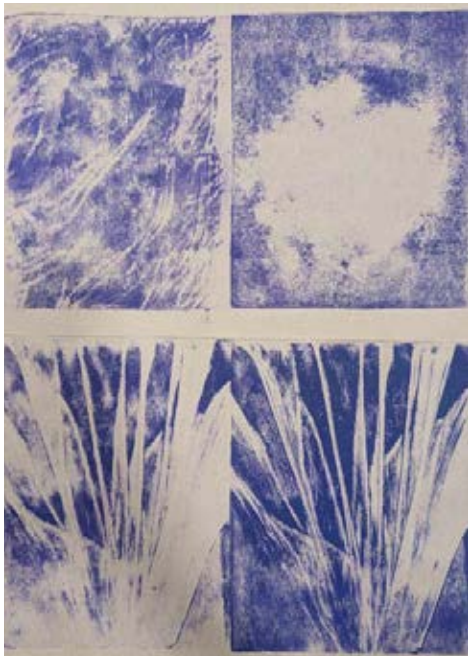
With a guiding story, I knew that I needed abstract imagery to represent my emotions. I made over 55 prints with the gel plate, some with intentional markmaking, and some with purely automatic gestures.

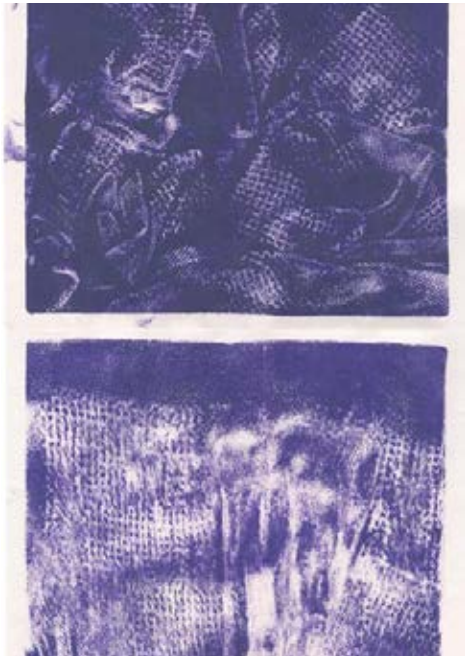
DIGITAL DESIGN:

The project needed to come together on one platform, so I moved to digitally editing the patterns and mocking up the interactions of the vellum, paper, and other tangibles. The vellum was tested and patterns adjusted accordingly.









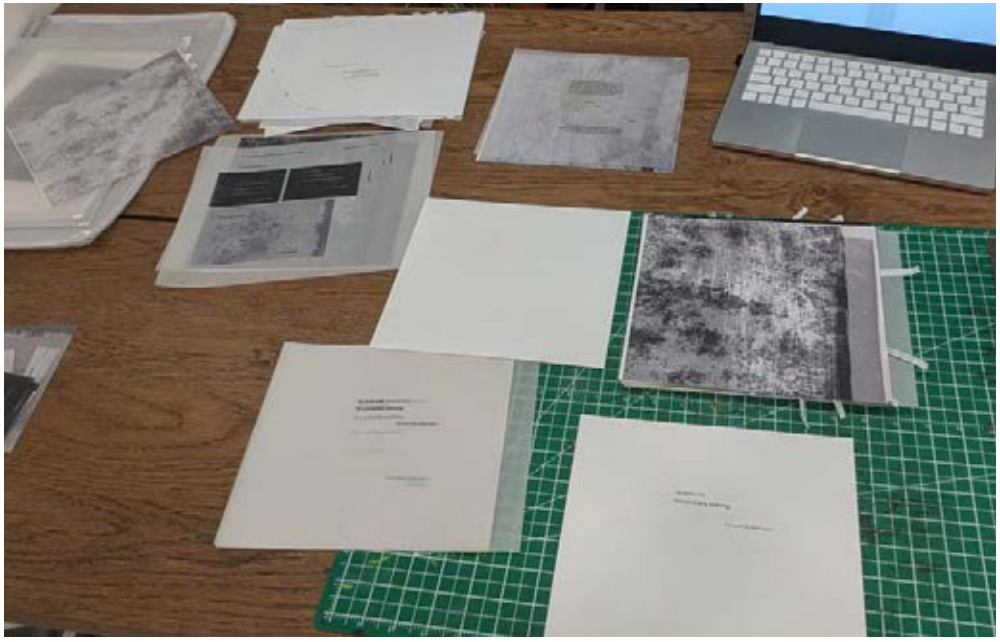
BOOKBINDING:

To bring the end product together, I attended a bookbinding workshop at SNAP Gallery. I learned two types of handbinding and how to build the elements of a handmade book. This was an element that I was excited to learn these new skills, as it was a part of the project that I felt would show and connect to the human hands that made the work.





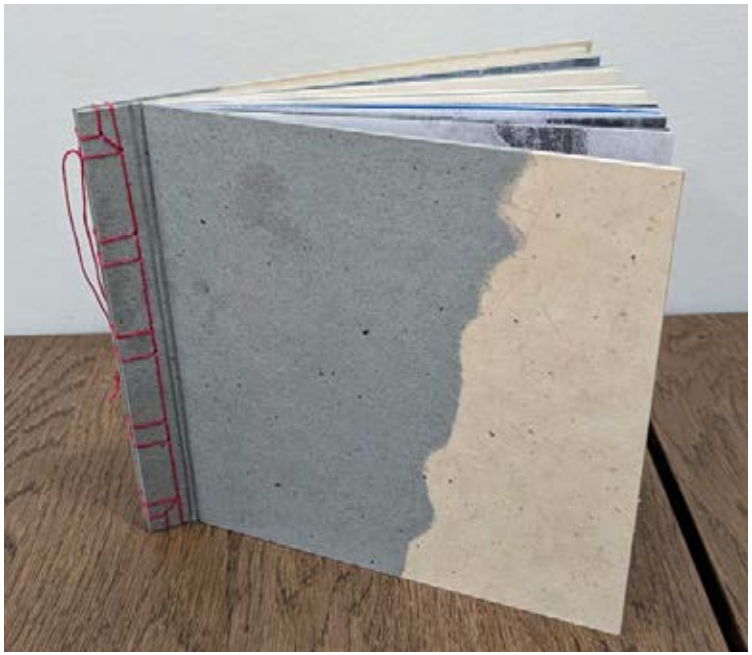




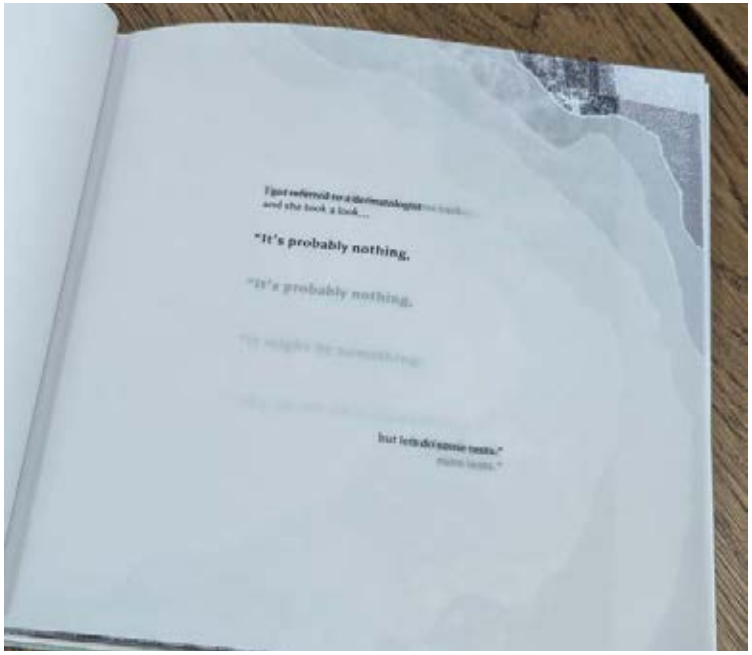


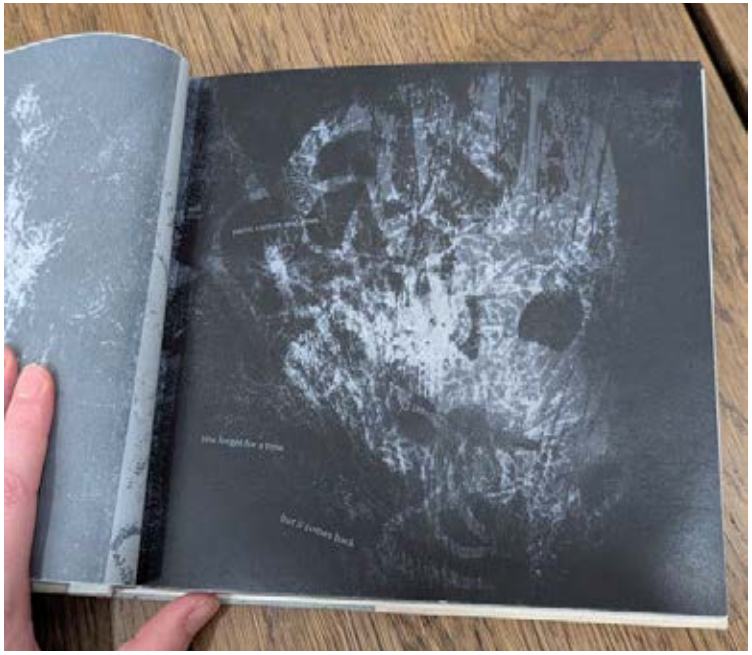
Final Outcome:

The final book tells the story of my perspective on navigating the process of receiving a medical diagnosis and the unexpected emotions that I experienced throughout and afterwards. While the text is simply written, it is personal and vulnerable, written how one might reflect to themselves or write in a journal. The text is set with a simple but humanistic typeface, Asul, so it may be approachable, but leave the voice and tone open to the reader's interpretation. Represented through abstract handmade art, the pages show the emotions felt at different points throughout time, the minimal text giving space for reflection and connection. Some images bring perspective back to the tangible world, grounding and guiding the text and reader, creating contrast between the internal and external worlds. The paper was chosen to connect with the physical act of reading, each type portraying different aspects of the story. The regular white paper feels predictable, comfortable, expected, one-dimensional and controlled. The vellum shows depth and layers of emotion, it foreshadows and compounds, it's hard to grasp and changes as you look. The sandpaper feels natural, sturdy, human, and warm – imperfect but beautiful. Red thread is present intermittently throughout the pages, showing a tangible, moving and recurring representation of the tension and fragility felt. The book overall is meant to be a vessel and carrier for the human nature within the story, and serve as an object of connection for the reader.



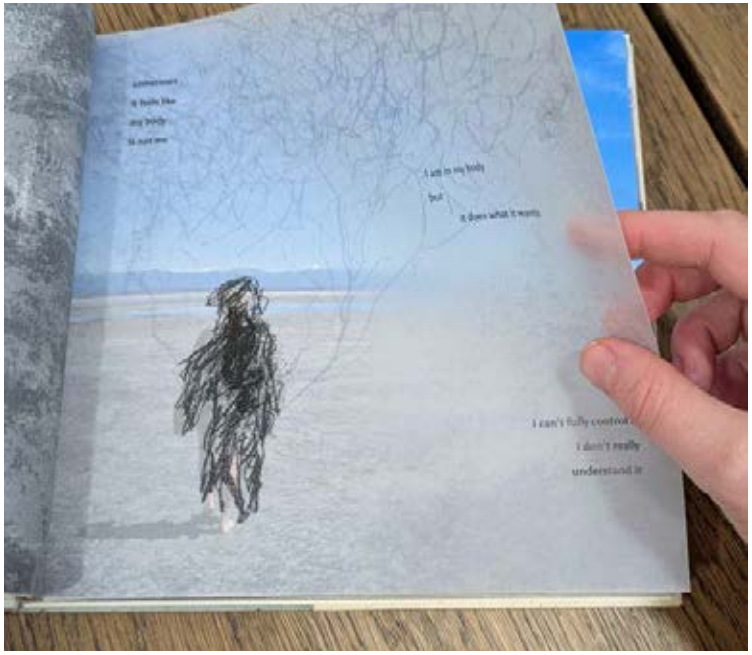



"It's probably nothing.








I am in my body
but
it does what it wants





Reflection:

Throughout the term, I found that my energy waxed and waned, and overall, this project was a heavier one. I felt very driven at the start of the project, ready to tell my story and make people understand, to put my feelings into something tangible for others to see. At the same time, I also felt myself pulling away, not wanting to do the mental work of reflecting on the times that I had those strong negative experiences. It took weeks longer than I anticipated to be able to sit and reflect, writing the story and my feelings in a coherent manner. I felt like I dipped in and out of mentally engaging with my work, one week keeping it at arm's length and the next holding it close to my chest and giving it everything I had. It was a constant re-analyzing, re-flecting, re-membering, re-living the thing I wanted to tell people. There were times where it felt cyclical, feeling anxious and angry at my body, then feeling guilty for being over-emotional, then telling myself to be kinder to the process. It slowly got easier, and I think it did what Bloem (2018) wrote about art being a method of analysis that removes it from ourselves. It felt like I could hold some of the emotion in front of me and see it as a whole, without being overwhelmed by it. I think that by making this book, it moved some of the rawness from myself onto the paper, and now I feel like I can leave it there. I can still open it when I want, I can look at it from afar, other people can take a peek. It's still a vulnerable thing to share, many of those emotions are still felt, but they are less intense, more easily soothed.

Conclusion:

From the start, this project's goal was to make a tactile piece of art that would connect with the reader by utilizing imagery and markmaking to convey complex human emotion. The artists' book proved to be a perfect medium for this, allowing me to create work that would guide the reader through a narrative and emotional story, hopefully becoming a source of insight and empathy. As I had read, the process of creating art that represents memory and emotion was a cathartic exercise but at times, an exhausting one. The final book combines several types of art making and tactile work, all in an effort to draw in and involve the reader as much as it involved the writer/artist. This was a successful art therapy practise, and can serve to show others how they could create for themselves.



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