

Invisible Injuries

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Abstract

In the exhibit, *Invisible Injuries*, emotional repercussions that follow Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are expressed through mixed media drawings using charcoal, pastel, ink, gouache and watercolor. PTSD occurs after an individual experiences a traumatic event. The body retaliates by developing defense mechanisms that can be self-destructive. These symptoms can include depression, disassociation, anger, anxiety, confusion and paranoia. Since general awareness of this disorder has increased in recent years due to a new generation of combat soldiers returning from Iraq, this series of artwork aims to discuss the symptoms of PTSD and the positive benefits art can have for these individuals who suffer from PTSD. In the following body of work, tension and anxiety are evoked between the figure and the space that surrounds it. Through the build up of lines, color, and texture, the figure is immersed within these layers to show not only the overwhelming psychological effects of trauma but also the repression of that trauma. This series shows how art can be used as therapy, providing for the artist—and perhaps viewers as well—a healing process that is necessary to move past painful memories.

1. Introduction

In these drawings trauma is visually represented, particularly the repercussions of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a currently very prevalent in our society and is a struggle for me personally. Thirty percent of people who have been in war zones develop PTSD. Approximately eighty percent of U.S. residents have experienced one or more traumatic events due to the loss of a loved one, domestic violence, shocking injuries or abuse.¹ Through different methods of art therapy, such as drawing, individuals are able to confront, express and understand their experiences. Trauma can be traced back to its Greek meaning, which is translated as “wound”². This wound is obtained from an event, or several events that are sudden, overwhelming, and often dangerous. Just like a physical wound, emotional pain from a traumatic situation can become irritated, difficult to forget and leave a mark that will always be there. Unlike a physical wound, there are no visual cues on the outside to realize what’s happening on the inside. Drawing helps me to confront my trauma because when drawing, I am able to visualize internal emotion that I cannot express verbally. These internal symptoms of trauma range from feelings such as hyper vigilance, depression, nervousness, paranoia, exhaustion, disassociation and an overall instability. The series *Invisible Injuries* gives visual form to these symptoms through line, composition and layering of materials.

PTSD happens after people have been exposed to severe, life threatening trauma to their selves or others with emotional responses involving fear, helplessness or horror. The amygdala and hippocampus in the limbic system inside the brain are affected when PTSD occurs. The amygdala is involved in fear-related behaviors in humans and animals such as aggression, arousal, fear and the involuntary responses associated with them. The amygdala is also associated with the sense of smell, which triggers memories and is thought to store emotional trauma-related imagery. It is the part of the memory system that is most responsible for processing memory associated with emotion. This is the part of the brain where one would process reactions such as flashbacks and fear because of a conditioned response to previous traumatic events. The hippocampus is responsible for the ability to store and retrieve memories, and the experience of trauma hinders its ability to do so. When there is a lot of activity in the

amygdala, the individual becomes conditioned to respond to any stress with fear and irritation. This is where PTSD and anxiety disorders are thought to occur.³

Trying to deal with the over-activity of the amygdala while responding to trauma can affect the body as well as the mind. Symptoms can include sleep disturbance, an exaggerated startled response, guilt about surviving, memory impairment, trouble concentrating, avoidance of activities, re-experiencing the event, and a detachment of feelings. These difficult repercussions describe the anxiety that almost always follows a traumatic event. An anxiety disorder can be acquired from any uncommon, extremely stressful event from assault, rape, military combat, floods, earthquakes, torture, and in my case head trauma and a car accident.

At a young age I experienced instances of abuse in my home situation that affected my psychological health and ability to deal with stressful situations. Trauma in a child's psychological development can ultimately distort or stunt the ability to regulate emotion, control impulses and increase the risk for anxiety and depression in the child's lifetime. Abuse-related PTSD puts stress on children and influences how the brain matures. In addition to suffering anxiety as a child, at sixteen I endured a near fatal car accident that caused me to develop PTSD. In my accident I was hit by a motor vehicle driving over a hundred miles an hour. This crash crushed and trapped me inside my car. Due to the impact of the hit I received a severe concussion along with other injuries. The impact caused a memory loss that is diagnosed as Post-Traumatic Amnesia. This is a state of confusion that immediately follows a traumatic brain injury (TBI), (i.e. a concussion, where you are unable to recall any events after the injury). It involves disorientation, confusion and an inability to "store and retrieve new information"⁴. It has also been defined as the point from which the patient can give an accurate and continuing account of happenings in his or her surrounding environment.

Fortunately I could remember my name and who I was but as far as what had happened there was no memory and probably never will be. In addition to this memory loss and head injury, I also had broken bones. I had a break in my arm, one that would require surgery and a crushed coccyx. Luckily this was the extent of my physical injuries from the accident, but after my surgery I was left with a scar that I would be repeatedly asked about for the rest of my life, continually explaining a story to which I had no mental connection. Trying to remember the accident caused me a lot of emotional confusion and stress. Although confronting the constant reminders of this event was painful, it was also helping me work through emotions. Mentally repeating the traumatic event in one's mind, or traumatic neurosis, is something that helps a victim come to an understanding.⁵ Since your mind is unconscious at the time of a traumatic event, not prepared to deal with it, the repetition is a way of moving and releasing this painful voice. It's seen as a wound, something that requires attention to heal. Even though explaining this story used to be a very exhausting and disturbing task for me, after seven years of it, I've become very comfortable with it and even proud. Through slowly accepting this part of my past my symptoms of anxiety and PTSD have gradually decreased. The damage from my accident is manageable but it isn't something that's going away and I will probably always have to deal with its effects on a daily basis.

In addition to the retelling of my story as a cathartic exercise, I use drawing as a way to visually communicate and address the critical consequences of trauma. It is also a method of releasing my own feelings caused by these events. I have never done well in stressful situations: my body locks up from anxiety, which clouds my brain from working the way it should. This is something I have had to consciously acknowledge and push myself to control. Art has been my greatest challenge and also my best teacher for battling this anxiety. Through gaining confidence in my drawing and artwork, I am able to get a grip on the anxiety in other parts of my life.

Drawing is one method of art therapy, a recently developed type of exposure therapy used in conjunction with psychotherapy, that has been very effective in helping victims with post-trauma disorders. Art therapy promotes hemisphere integration, linking the verbal with the non-verbal.⁶ When a traumatic event occurs areas of the brain that handle speech and cognition shut down. Recalling this event can often be very difficult for the individual but sensory memory is strong and often flashbacks do occur. Allowing the victim of trauma to express the traumatic event through drawing allows him or her to transfer unspoken emotion onto a concrete picture plane. The traumatic event can be released without necessarily verbalizing it. This process can often be painful and re-traumatizing but by uncovering the experience one can gain power and emotional numbness towards the memory. Re-creating harmful images and then discarding them emits negative emotions and energy into a secure environment, which can be cleansing, cathartic and can feel protective.

Considering the increased awareness of PTSD with a new generation of American soldiers, combat veterans, older Vietnam veterans, and other war-related veterans, everything possible is being done to improve the care of PTSD patients. Art therapy is a crucial step to help PTSD victims move past their experiences. It allows them to process, release and control their feelings from a traumatic experience in a safe environment. It has been proven effective for PTSD because of the nature of traumatic memories. In the case where an individual cannot communicate their traumatic event verbally, art expression is thought to be most useful in treating their trauma because it taps into the

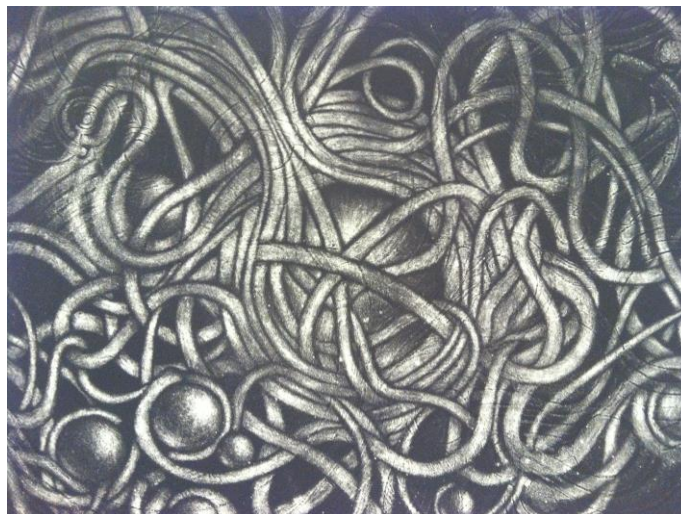
unconscious where images of the memories exist. This type of therapy also provides a pleasurable distraction that releases traumatic material without any verbal intervention.

I first started to become aware of my own anxiety in art when I noticed my inability to focus and relax while taking Life Drawing classes. I was put into situations where there was a time limit, I was constantly being watched and my art was on display. This created a tendency for my mark-making to be very linear and chaotic, trying to always correct my lines with more lines. At the end of the session I would be left with a series of a million marks.



Ashley Hinceman, 2011, *Life Drawing Sketches*, charcoal, 30"x20" each.

The result was not a proportional figure or a complete recognizable figure, but the energy of my mark making was very visible. Looking at my drawings viewers would become anxious and overwhelmed, just as I had felt making the piece. My challenge was to figure out what I could do with those marks that would not only satisfy my purpose as an artist but also make sense to my viewers. This aggressive linear style led me to printmaking, a medium that embraces line and the layering of line.



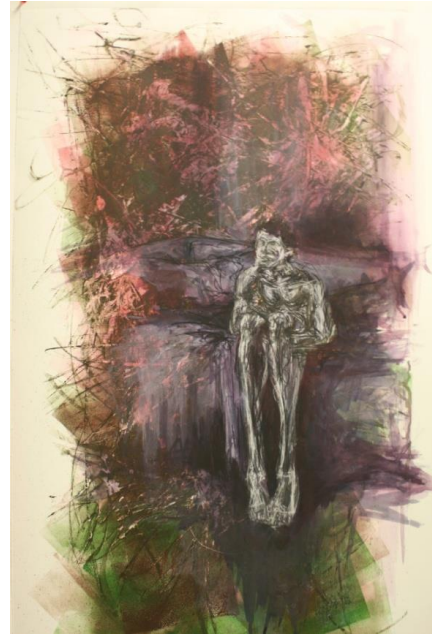
Noodles 3, black ink, 30"x20", 2010

2. Methodology

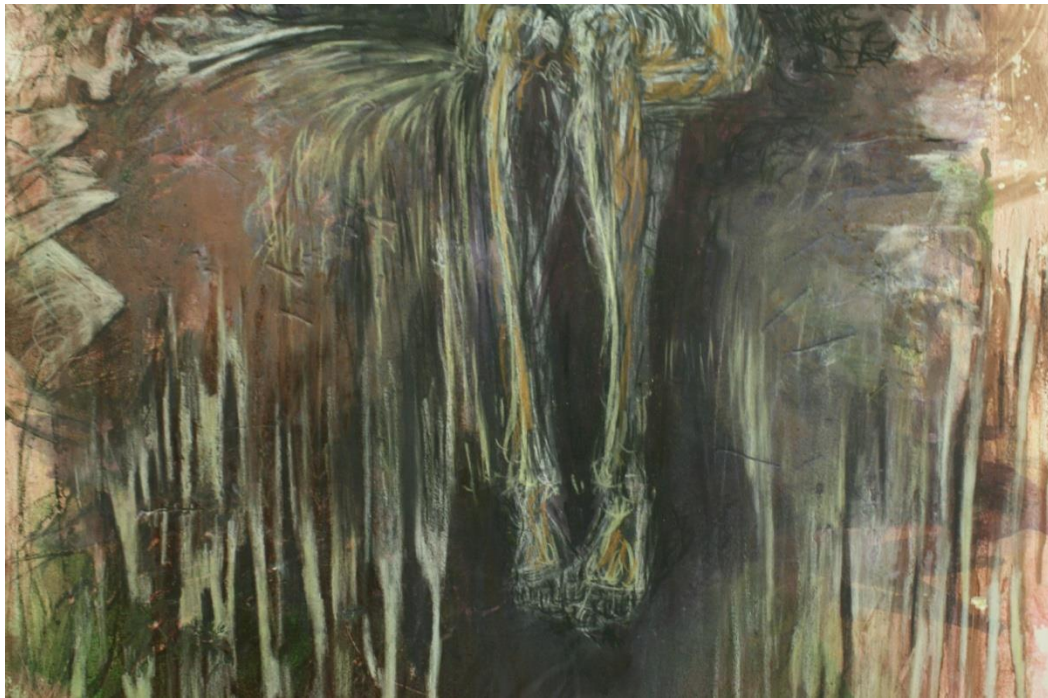
By learning printmaking techniques (such as etching, monotype, and mezzotint) I learned how I could continually rework a surface and constantly layer colors and images. I created mezzotints that were a combination of spheres and conduits I described as noodles. They were creations out of my imagination, and the more I produced the more complicated they became. I referenced images such as spaghetti and bodily entrails. Like my emotions while working through my trauma, these forms were knotted, twisted, and unable to be unraveled. Drawing allowed me to begin to loosen the pressure felt from the tightness of these knots. The patterns of lines with these images followed a confusing path of twists and turns. I could relate to the chaos it represented not only with my work but also within my self. The noodle prints slowly became representational of this obvious suffocation and chaos I felt within myself. I realized this pressure was coming from symptoms of trauma that I couldn't constrain. Conflicts with my parents as a child and an adult, a fatal car accident as a teenager and confusion as an artist I was feeling a lot of unsettled weight on my mind and body. From here I started making a body of work that would allow me to feel relief and voice tension I had felt for years.



Ashley Hinceman, *Hallie*, 2012, oil paint, pastel, charcoal, gouache, 42x 42"



Tim, pastel, charcoal, gouache with reference photograph, 36" x 24", 2012



Ashley Hinceman, *Tim*, 2012, pastel, charcoal, gouache, (Detail).

I started creating portraits, translating energy and chaos from the noodles in my prints into the figures I was drawing. The tension from this energy was very reminiscent of anxious feelings related to trauma. I realized these were feelings I was having and I decided to turn that emotion into portraits. These portraits represent the uncontrollable inner repercussions of trauma that are hard to grasp. With these portraits, I developed a process that is now a critical part of expressing the psychological repression of trauma in my work. I start off by photographing a

variety of people, including myself, since this is a condition that is not limited to any certain persons. I place the models in positions or situations that are awkward and uncomfortable, reflecting the physical tension and mental frustration that can be caused from trauma. I use these photographs as a reference and then exaggerate and manipulate the form of the figure to match certain emotions that define PTSD. For example, in the drawing above *Tim*, the figure's legs are elongated and thinned out to express the exhaustion and weakness anxiety can cause. By abstracting the figure I accentuate the emotional affects of PTSD on the outer skin and body. These emotions such as depression, anxiety and fear are exposed to communicate the severity of their effects that typically can't be recognized at first glance.

In my process I start with a light charcoal rendering of the figure. From here I experiment with the figure between layers of drawing, painting and printing to figure out what the end product will be. Layer by layer visual tension increases, symbolizing the overwhelming depth of someone's emotions resulting from traumatic events. The figure emerges through these layers of pastel, charcoal and ink that build up a thick condensed area to voice the energy of anxiety underneath one's skin and physical appearance. The space surrounding the figure is an environment I create through the layering of marks and the designs I produce from printing. I do this through freely painting with gouaches, watercolors and printing patterns of ink that abstracts the environment, giving the figure and the viewer a sense of bewilderment. This is confusing and unsettling, affirming the artificial and unsafe sense of reality one has under anxiety.

In these pieces the feeling of weighted emotions and confusion from PTSD is created through the construction of a restless surface of lines, color, and texture. This is important in representing the affects of PTSD because its impact can be overwhelming and typically victims repress it. Repression and denial are common defense mechanisms for coping with pain and a way to respond to threatening stimuli. A person hides oneself from the truths and events that are too painful to accept or deal with. This response is involuntary and it's a rejection of the repetitive conscious pain resulting from memories and imagery related to the event. One places those horrible memories into the unconscious where they stay until dealt with or forgotten. The drawings show the battle undergone when dealing with PTSD and the inability to understand it.

Through drawing I transfer the chaos I feel inside into a concrete form, and by drawing something I can manipulate and control my pain. By using my own trauma as a catalyst for my work, I allow viewers to relate to and understand the possibility for one to heal positively through art. This will hopefully give others a chance to be aware of their own anxieties and possibly feel better about it. The viewer can also recognize the importance of a cathartic healing process such as drawing.

3. Influences

When I am drawing I trust where my intuition is leading me, which gives my work surreal and expressive qualities. I have discovered two artists in my time at UNC Asheville that have deeply influenced my style: Francis Bacon and Alberto Giacometti. Bacon had an automatic and expressive approach to painting, and in order for my pieces to have honest emotion I must follow the same method. Through his unconventional and spontaneous style he expressed the human nervous system through distorted solid shapes that create form and have a surrealist undertone.⁷ Giacometti also had a very direct approach to painting that was filled with obsessive line that expressed frustration and anxiety. I combine both Giacometti and Bacon's influences to find a middle ground with the form and line that express movement but also a sense of apprehension. Contemporary artists Ann Gale and Ginny Greyson also use line and shape as a way to activate the space and figure in their work. I reference their methods in my drawings as well with a sense of movement and edginess that consumes the whole piece.



(Left) Ashley Hinceman, *Alexa*, 2012, ink, pastel, gouache, 42x 24"
 (Right) Alberto Giacometti, *Grand Nu (Tall Nude)*, 1962

Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti was a figure painter in the 1930's until late 1960's who incorporated the same linear style I use in my drawings. We are also similar with regards to understanding our style through years of classical training. He was raised in a painting family and for years he tried to follow a traditional style of working. Inevitably this was something he could never fully commit to and eventually deviated into his own avant-garde path. The instilled habit of making the figure proportional actually worked to his advantage. I also relate to this anxiety regarding the need to perfect my figures. This anxiety caused both Giacometti and myself to develop linear styles of obsessively reworking the figure, and pushed us towards different styles and modes of thinking away from Western modernism. Cubism, primitive art, surrealism and existentialism were shifts in art that were huge for re-thinking the figure and deeply influenced Giacometti's style. Primitive art especially played a pivotal role in freeing Giacometti from past conventions, and it was African art that taught him to completely re-work the figure. In continuing to explore his unconventional style, surrealism and the violence of World War II Giacometti's work took on narratives and psychological implications. Through constant disappointment and annoyance with achieving accuracy, surrealist influences, and emotional postwar expressionism, he matured into a unique style that has an almost hallucinatory quality to it.

His post-war sculptures are tall emaciated figures that are detailed with patches, ridges, and grooves of bronze that suggest the craters and scars of ravaged flesh, representing the devastation of the war. One reviewer of his work states that his figures were "inevitably fragile and lonely looking; they seem to represent all that is joyless in the human lot. Stretched to the breaking point, they dominate more space than they fill, and this is their sole dignity."⁸ Even when associations were not specifically to wartime suffering, viewers still understood them as metaphors for the human condition, images that transcend historical events and transitory emotional states. Modern psychology has taught us that many after-effects of war are manifestations of PTSD, and Giacometti's sculptures express that visually.

His paintings exhibit the same emotion as his sculptures do. They rarely seem finished and illustrate extreme unequal proportions and psychological tension within line that creates a disturbing, almost nightmarish atmosphere. He had a very tactile approach to painting. He would constantly re-paint, revise and wipe out parts of his paintings slowly building up a texture as if they were sculpture. By doing this repeatedly he was able to create a form and space that stimulated and annihilated the surface of the canvas. The energy created by this method is often interpreted as anxious, which is without a doubt true, but to Giacometti it was how he saw reality. Giacometti was an

annoyed and obsessive person, which definitely assisted his practice, and he was almost never satisfied with anything he did. He was also fixated with the gaze. The gaze is used in art as a way of controlling the viewer's focus, particularly the male focus. In classic female portraiture the gaze is used to dominate and redirect the male attention.⁹ In Giacometti's portraits, the gaze is used to focus the viewer's attention to the center of the head. The eyes of the head stare straight out at the viewer, inviting the viewer into the piece. This is an element in my work that is effective in adding anxiety to the piece because it forces the viewer to be aware of that they are staring. Suddenly the viewer is no longer a voyeur and they feel as if they have been caught misbehaving. The direct stare used in the two pieces, *Hallie* and *Head of Diego*, averts the viewer's attention to himself or herself, and they become the one who is anxious. By using line to draw the viewer into the eyes and stare, the piece becomes paralyzing and hypnotic, adding even more anxiety to the piece.



Left: Alberto Giacometti, *Head of Diego*, 1961, Right: Ashley Hinceman, *Hallie*, 2012

This obsessive nature of constantly building, correcting and defining space and shapes is how I relate to Giacometti. Learning about Giacometti's process has taught me how to transfer and manipulate emotion through an artistic medium. We both have a constant psychological need for a challenge, which also results in a compulsive style of reworking. This was most prominent in Giacometti's paintings and is what I mostly connect too. When you are filled with so much angst and anger, nothing feels better than when you have a source that you can constantly feed it into. It is only normal that the anxiety coming from within us both would translate so well into a medium that is meant to communicate the senses and the mind. Without the influences of Giacometti I may have never wanted to push forward with my linear style that not only intensifies my anxieties but also confronts and communicates it.

Francis Bacon is another figurative painter creating work within the same time frame as Giacometti and was influenced by his work. Much like Giacometti, Bacon's work has many opportunities for psychological implications. He was also a post-war artist but unlike Giacometti, had no formal training or school prior to being an artist. He firmly believed that constant exposure to other techniques could spoil one's own style so he worked mostly through trial and error. He came from parents who did not accept him, frequently moved and kicked him out at age 17. He grew up with terrible asthma that affected him so badly he had to have surgery. He was also very involved with activities and people who were not stable or socially accepted. He gambled, drank, and had many affairs with men who were violent and suicidal. His work is thought to reflect his childhood trauma, violent sexuality and excessive lifestyle. As someone that also grew up with an unsettling childhood and trauma, I can sympathize with the need to use art as a cathartic exercise to express and release such emotions. He approached painting by embracing chance and accidents, which allowed for his unconscious senses and thoughts to be revealed. In my drawings, there is an amount of emotion that is released that largely contributes to the outcome and mood of the piece. Both Bacon and I get this emotion out through the movement of our tools because it is working a part of the brain that contains sensation, the nervous system. Bacon saw the movement and behavior of paint as an opportunity for the artist to open up and unlock valves of feelings.¹⁰ By working from the nervous system of the artist, something much more profound escaped than what Bacon initially wanted.



(Left) Ashley Hinceman, *Dakota*, ink, pastel, gouache, and charcoal, 2011, 20 x 30"
 (Right) Francis Bacon, *Pope / Study After Pope Innocent X by Velazquez*, 1951, oil on canvas, 197.8 x 137.4 cm,

The chaos in Bacon's life translated into his paintings. He was very much attracted to it and had an unconscious need to re-create it. He quotes, "Chaos for me breeds images."¹¹ He used painting as a way to reproduce the chaos of reality through the unconscious and the use of chance, which allowed his paintings to be naturally abstract. Most, if not all his paintings are one accident piled on top of another. Whatever accidents happened during these paintings were real according to Bacon. They were real in that they were communicating the world as Bacon experienced it. These accidents were emotive and visceral and existed outside of the conscious and the rational intellect.

He believed they were merely images of sensation: senses you feel from life and sensation from within yourself. "After all what is life but sensation? What we feel and what happens,"¹² Bacon states. He believed his paintings communicated the violence that is life but never saw them as images of horror: "What horror could I make to compete with what goes on every single day, what could I do to compete with the horrors going on? Except try to make images of it, re-create it and make images of realism."¹³ Bacon intrigues me mostly because he paints what he feels no matter how frightening or appalling it is. The act of painting is an exercise of his emotions and he is not afraid of them. Bacon gives me confidence to convey an area of human emotion in my drawings that are terrifying and difficult to verbalize. By re-creating the horror of dealing with trauma, I create images of truth. This something Bacon strived to achieve in all of his paintings.

Contemporary artist Ann Gale is a figure painter who resides in Seattle, Washington who uses portraiture as a way to express and explore the psyche and sexuality of both the artist and subject. Alberto Giacometti is also an influence to her style, both trying to achieve exactness and tearing the figure away in the process. She approaches the figure as an opportunity to discover and undress the human psyche. Her process is complex, rough, but essential for her goal of fragmenting and dematerializing the painted figure. She works directly from live models very slowly, sometimes for months. Spending large amounts of time with her sitters is very important to her process; it allows her to get to know them. Sometimes she doesn't even work just uses the time to observe and chat with the model. All of the models I use for imagery I have a close relationship with. This interaction and closeness is very important to creating emotion in our pieces because it creates a sense of personal and unguarded atmosphere in working with the figure. This type of regimented painting involves three-hour sessions, twice a week for at least four months. With the amount of time spent and short separated brushstrokes eventually she creates pieces that visually express a breakdown of the figure that merges with the background. This is also how I work, I continually go back and rework my pieces, and it's very rare I finish a piece in one sitting. The pieces end up resembling a battlefield, which can be seen in my strong use of line with the figure. The movements of the brushstrokes allow you to witness the tracks and traces of art and life at war with each other. Her figures shift in and out of space, simultaneously collapsing and expanding where the figure only appears partly real. This back and forth nature of her figures closely relates to the figures in my drawings that get annihilated with line between the layers of ink, gouache and watercolor. This communicates not only interaction between her and her subject but also voices being human and frail amid chaos.¹⁴



Ann Gale, *Rachel Study*, oil and graphite on mylar, 17"x11.5"



Ginny Grayson, *Untitled*, charcoal and gesso on paper, 2011

Ginny Grayson is another contemporary artist who is influenced by the works of Giacometti and the use of line. Much like Giacometti she loves line and feels her way through line, allowing the imagery to feel ambiguous. Her process is intuitive in a way that keeps the drawing fairly loose. She feels her way through the interrelating forms of the composition. The same method is used in my drawing process so that the emotions I am feeling can flow freely into the figures I create. Images happen through experimentation and accidents that occur during the drawing process. She quotes Lucian Freud to best describe her process: "The harder you concentrate the more things that are really in your head start coming out."¹⁵ She uses the figure as a device to speak of the difficulty of being real in today's world and how that can make it difficult to pin down one's own identity. By erasing and re-working the drawing over and over again she communicates the notion of the "self" as being something that gets lost and can hinder the ideal state of being.¹⁶ When going through the emotions trauma can cause, the sense of self can often get lost. In my drawings the figure is used to communicate this loss by a process of layering and erasing that conveys the difficult nature of finding one's self when dealing with so many emotions.

4. Conclusion

In concluding, this series has helped me to find control in my mark making to bring attention to a method of therapy that is very helpful in dealing with PTSD. Through controlling my mark making, I find control within myself as well. Drawing has been a method for me to find structure within the madness of myself. Once I noticed my preference for line and explored where that was coming from, I could gain control over it. PTSD causes invisible energy to run through the human form. Art is used to channel the thoughts of traumatic experiences to heal victims of PTSD in a non-verbal manner. Drawing is an immediate and liberating process for releasing painful imagery. Through drawing, one can illustrate this phenomenon by manipulation of line, and doing so has helped me quiet the apprehension I once had within myself. I use my drawing devices as tools for releasing energy. The frustration I feel with my past is manifested within the drawings where tension is not only safe but encouraged. By creating this series I visually represent the beneficial effects art therapy is thought to have on people dealing with PTSD. The viewer can leave my work with that same sense of empathy and realize that the destructive pain caused from trauma and how it can be harnessed into something extremely positive and powerful.

5. Endnotes

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