

“To Feel Many Other Ways”

Wallis Flanagan

Department of Art and Art History
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Mentor: Robert Dunning

Abstract

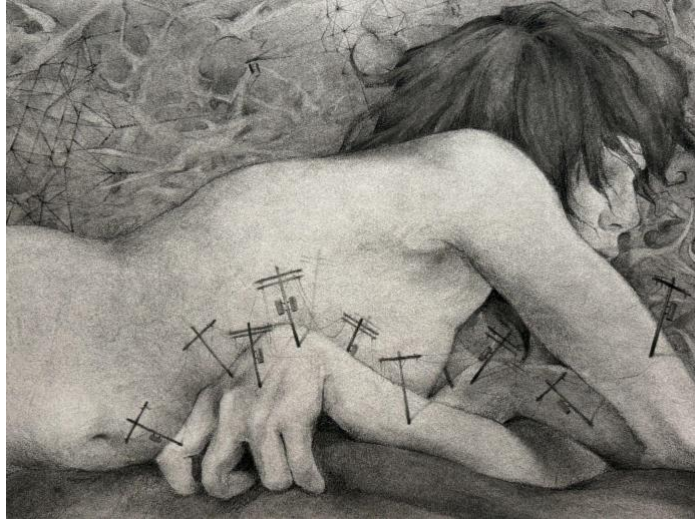
How can artwork display the complexities of how overwhelming it can be to be sentient, and how does this correlate to emotional and physical intimacy, sensory experiences, and thought? Can a body of work be created to bring out the thoughts and feelings we keep in the background of our minds, muddled by normalcy? I seek to peel the layers of thoughts, habits, and memories of my mind to further understand myself by translating them into visual compositions. Often, living and thinking can be incredibly overwhelming and the creation of this body of work has helped to break down individual experiences, feelings, and places that feel as though they are pulling at my mind. These works not only function as an exploration of the sensory, but as a diary of what feels most significant at certain times of my life.

As a body of artwork, *To Feel Many Other Ways* explores the complexities behind sensory experiences from a hypersensitive and queer lens. Oftentimes, this work is inspired by touch, pain, and intimacy in lesbian relationships, using the female figure to display bodies crashing into each other. Exploring both pleasure and pain and the area in between, these works use symbols of sharpness to signify pain and connection between nude female figures to depict desirable closeness.

Senses are often overlooked as we are used to the normalcy of feeling, seeing, hearing, etc., but exploring the privilege we have been given has led to the creation of these works. To feel and to document it through our perception is a gift. There's art behind observation and noticing these patterns, and this work seeks to capture the energy behind lived moments, whether they be overwhelming, painful, pleasurable, or a muddled mixture of it all.

How can artwork display the complexities behind the sensory, including pleasure and pain and the grey area in between? How can metaphors and symbols be used to communicate the unspoken overwhelming nature of feeling? I seek to peel the layers of thoughts, habits, and memories of my mind to further understand myself by translating them into visual compositions. Oftentimes, it can be difficult to put feelings and experiences into words, as I don't have much experience with communicating them because I was selectively mute for many years. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association defines this experience as a complex anxiety disorder affecting the ability to speak when expected yet possessing the ability to speak when comfortable. These works act as a crutch to express complex sides of myself that are hard to explain. I have been wanting to push myself to find words to describe my feelings and how they heavily relate to sensory experiences and intimacy. Lately, people in my life have been giving me opportunities to feel more welcome to describe my thought processes and how I see the world, increasing my "thinking about thinking". This can be a very overwhelming feeling, often associated with a cluster of thoughts that need to be untangled and dissected to further understand my consciousness and thought patterns, which I have been increasingly interested in throughout my life and artistic exploration.

This exploration touches on many thoughts, questions, and emotions that are connected to sentience, relationships, intimacy, and more. One theme highlights the disturbance of being in a physical body, what it means to feel and experience a range of sensations every day, and where this thought process can take me. I believe our ability to sense the world around us in various ways is a blessing, yet it can be overwhelming to know that we are incessantly in contact with something else, we are always physical and have the opportunity to feel the sensory extremes behind pain and pleasure. Additionally, our bodies as a machine tie these physical sensory experiences with emotions, tied up and mixed around in the brain. In my piece *To Feel Many Other Ways*, it connects the experience of a sexual trauma response that occurs to the feeling of electricity, currents, and nerves. I felt as though an intense, painful current was running through me, specifically through my arms and hands, as my body desperately wanted to do anything to be numb to sexual experiences because of what it had experienced in the past. My hands curl up in a painful cramp and my face goes distorted and numb, unable to kiss or embrace a partner in the way I desperately want to. According to the National Library of Medicine, traumatic experiences can cause physical and somatic symptoms, including neurological symptoms. My brain's perception of a physical situation as a threat, though untrue, led me to have a nervous system response, which caused intense paresthesia (pins and needles) and my hands to uncontrollably seize, unable to relax and unfurl.



To Feel Many Other Ways, 2025

Additionally, I think about the internal workings of the body, how they are sometimes neat and symmetrical or messy and tangled, yet aesthetically beautiful and alluring if we remove the notion of disgust we commonly have about our bodies. I'm often overwhelmed by how much is going on within the body that I cannot access or see, but it is the whole reason I am alive and functioning. I've grown extremely appreciative of the internal workings of my body, though it may bring pain, it's the body's way of telling me something is wrong. There's a discomfort I've always had in my body as I have always been paranoid that there was something awry about my insides that I was unaware of. During my creation of these anatomical pieces, I went to the OBGYN to get an ultrasound and they found a large growth in my pelvis, as my left ovary had been taken over by a tumor. Before this discovery I made my piece *Get This Out Of Me*, which highlights my need for control over my body and what could possibly be disturbing my insides. It is as if I subconsciously sensed there was something unfavorable growing within me. For the first time in my life I had to get surgery and they removed my left ovary and fallopian tube. Before and after surgery I created the piece *Tumor Remover* where I pictured a figure removing the mass herself. I used this figure to represent myself as I feared strangers, although medical professionals, accessing my body in such an intimate way.



Get This Out Of Me



Tumor Remover

Another main theme behind sensory extremes connects to the complexities of intimacy and how it connects to the senses. Emotional and physical intimacy may push and pull with each other, depending on personal experiences. Complex senses may turn painful and frightening, yet pleasurable because of the nature of connecting with another person. I often think about being in my own body and the blessing of touch as a sense, and what that means for another person as they are experiencing the same feelings. The human instinct to give affection to feel the warmth of another body on our hands, without the expectation of any touch or affection in return. In my piece *Lovers Reimagined*, I was heavily thinking about the nature of intimacy and how unique many facets of it are to the human experience. I thought of physical touch as something primal and how our need for it is not the result of social construction, as many things are. It's instinctive, and sometimes the intensity behind it feels ravenously animalistic. Additionally, I link physical touch to a spiritual practice where we are connecting through the senses. Something is heightening about knowing you are in your body, and so is the person across from you, but you'll never truly feel what they feel, and they'll never feel what you feel. But you're trusting of it all, and it brings us to a state I see as something elevated and spiritual. Additionally, the creation of the piece *Parallels* connects the closeness of bodies to nature and a particular scene I would drive by while returning home from my parents' house, where large, towering telephone poles reach over an expanse of land. These telephone poles remind me of two women holding hands as they stand tall coupled with other pairings of telephone poles. There's a connection between electricity and closeness, and how sometimes experiencing touch with another person feels like we are feeling through wires and currents.



Lovers Reimagined



Parallels

Like *Parallels*, *Lovers Reimagined* explores the positives behind intimate relationships, but also explores the complexities of it where it may run into seeking pain and punishment for the sake of feeling something. Oftentimes, the body and mind feel like they are at a plateau, bored with the incessant monotony of life. There's a need to overcomplicate and get into risky relationships, just to feel some sort of extreme, whether it be anger and sadness or physical pain when intimate. This is explored in pieces: *Seekers*, *Tell Me What Hurts So I Can Do It More*, and *I'll Be A Girl You Like To Feel*. Each work reflects both mental and physical tribulations in intimate relationships. Especially in queer relationships there can be an unconscious part of us that feels the need to overcomplicate and to feel pain and punishment due to internalized homophobia. Sometimes, it feels as though I am seeking out risky and painful situations with partners subconsciously, *Seekers* reflects two figures in bed collapsing over each other, stepping on each other with boots, and pulling hair. It's a vivid depiction of how I see sex at times, a jumbled mess of body parts with sharp objects and rough edges. These figures are not unhappy to be there, but willing participants on both sides. *Tell Me What Hurts So I Can Do It More* comes from a scene in an abandoned building in my favorite local cemetery which has been tagged with the words. I had visited this building many times over the course of four years and the graffiti appeared recently over the summer during a time where I was questioning what I was doing to please other people. I included female figures, awls, and abstracted sharp forms to highlight the feeling of what these words meant to me. Sharp and soft, as if pain was a kind offering.

I'll Be A Girl You Like To Feel displays the performance of femininity and sexuality that is untrue to me, yet I still feel the need to perform for someone when intimate, at times. There's a connection between cell towers and femininity as I always

have seen them as feminine, woman-like forms. Towing, tall, tapered, all connected to one another. One cell tower has collapsed to signify the adverse of this femininity. Queerness is complicated and sometimes, it takes a long time to unlearn heteronormative narratives taught throughout life. So, sometimes there still is a need to pose in a way that is palatable as a female person, though presenting more androgynous feels the most comfortable and authentic.



Tell Me What Hurts So I Can Do It More



I'll Be A Girl You Like To Feel

My work process is mostly instinctive, where I create a composition in my mind based on these thoughts, and I play around with the image on the paper. I appreciate the use of freeness in my work as much as possible. It brings out the energy I am envisioning when initially thinking of a drawing. The materials I use are charcoal, pen and ink, and occasionally watercolor. These materials have the opportunity for delicate, tight areas of the work, as well as areas where I can have places of rest and expressive mark-making. My work commonly uses the figure or objects that can be used in place of the traditional human figure, which I have aesthetic and emotional ties to. I enjoy using the human female figure as something I can distort and make beautiful yet uncomfortable, to highlight expression and compositional interest. I want to display the nude female form as something unsexualized, but instead queer, distorted, and expressive.

Technically, some parts of these drawings are very detailed and highlighted to create moments of busyness that will capture the viewer, and moments of softness and

rest that let the composition breathe. Moving around charcoal is one of the ways I achieve this, where I can blur parts of the image and let other parts draw more attention. Working with aqueous materials like inkwash and watercolor can allow for moments of control as well as soft, quiet moments that the water can obscure. I work well with this process and letting myself work intuitively has helped connect what is conceptually important to me with my work, as it all can connect to furthering my understanding of myself. Initially, I was doing very controlled work that was painstaking, diligent, and fully fleshed out, but I have grown to let myself let go and experiment with mark-making and what is fully rendered and what isn't. This decision has allowed me to progress through my body of work more confidently, and I can move faster when conceptualizing and creating new pieces. I've chosen this process out of instinct and what I know works best for me as an artist, by using what materials and content matter that excite me. I believe my process and concept tie together as a demonstration of myself and my creative direction. I felt the biggest shift when creating my piece *Seekers*, which is larger than how I usually work, and I allowed myself to render what was most important and get more expressive with mark-making.



Seekers

This body of work has many inspirations stemming from visual artists, musicians, and other forms of design and storytelling through video games and shows. I'm inspired by the world around me, organic and inorganic forms, and how that can be used compositionally as tools of expression. My inspirations are fueled by nostalgia, what has heavily emotionally stuck with me, and objects that I tie to emotion, like abandoned places, beds, old vehicles, deterioration and rust, and the overwhelming detail of nature and the world around us.

Hayden Anhedönia, known by her stage name Ethel Cain, is a musician who makes incredibly conceptual works, always following a theme or a fictional storyline used to talk

about many themes. Her work is largely connected to religion, as she is a trans woman raised in Florida as a Southern Baptist. She explores the complexity of her feelings about religion and Christianity through her lens.

I am specifically inspired conceptually by her album “Perverts”, released January 2025, which explores the theme of sensory experiences and their extremes, whether it be through sex, drugs, self-gratification, religion, or love. She explores the human instinct to want to feel pleasure and to seek extremes, but we cannot healthily stay within those bounds, and we must leave these heightened experiences. From this project, she has a song titled “Amber Waves”, which is lyrically the most inspirational to me, where she dives the most into seeking sensory extremes and its effect on ourselves and the people around us. She sings, “I still kick rocks when the walking is good, and pretend at the chain link that I am the wood. As I’m leaning my head back, saying ‘take me, I ain’t gonna scream’ (Cain. 2025). Yet, here I am, empty, watching love of mine leave. But I’ll be alright, me and my Amber waves.” “Amber Waves” explores seeking a heightened experience through drug use and characterizes the effects of these drugs as a person named Amber, which is a personification of casting loved ones away to get high. She would much rather experience the extremes and risks of drug use than the vulnerability of connection and love with another person. She pretends she is much stronger than she knows she is and tests her limitations because risky, heightened experiences are increasingly familiar to her. I connect with this because I believe we all get stuck in a feeling of monotony, and acting on impulse, though it may be harmful to us, allows us to feel something different and extreme in the moment. It feels good until we see the aftermath. In creating *Seekers*, I was thinking of this feeling described in “Amber Waves” and how, instead of drug use, my “Amber” would be pain. From a young age, I always felt discomfort and pain in my body and found ways to cope with it at the time and tried to convince myself that the pain felt good, and in turn, I trained myself to believe so in many cases. *Seekers* describes the need for pain and wanting the outlet to be through another person, so it cannot be seen as self-inflicted. I know it is unhealthy and an uncomfortable part of myself to address, but the creation of this piece has helped me do so in a productive manner, which I imagine would be the motivation behind the creation of such a vulnerable project like “Perverts” as well. A common quote affiliated with this album, which comes from the title track, says “it’s happening to everybody”, which is a comforting memento to everyone feeling the “pull” to closeness to God, through heightened, self-gratifying actions.

Additionally, Ethel Cain connects sensory experiences with sound, experimenting with “field recordings,” which are sounds found outside of a traditional music studio, like whirring from electrical boxes and radio static from AM frequencies. I am thoroughly inspired by how she sees the senses and brings them forth as a complex audio experience, which ties with her lyrical concepts of these extremes. Another interesting aspect of this project is its connection to architecture and the idea of temples, and how

large, towering structures can be some sort of monument to God. In turn, she seeks to capture this idea of the temple solely through sound in the song “Thatorchia,” which is a fictitious word she defined as “God will let you near, but will not let you stay.” Outside of this work, she has made videos about her love for architecture, particularly Brutalism and its harshness, which connects to how to visually picture “Thatorchia” as a brutalist temple. This work has greatly inspired how I think about the senses and how I can visually conceptualize them. Many of my works have been made with this project playing, as I always gain more visual ideas through sound and lyrics rather than visuals.

Mario Abela is a contemporary artist from Malta focusing on the “interweaving of man and nature in the age defined by the notion of the Anthropocene.” (Abela. 2025.) His works are a tie between representational and abstract, focusing on the human body. Sometimes, his work is almost unrecognizable until you spend more time with it, noticing patterns like limbs, veins, muscles, and skin. His more expressive charcoal works are most inspiring to me, as he has expressive lines and seems to work more intuitively in these works in comparison to his paintings, which are more fleshed out and give every detail and color to the viewer. He looks at the inner and outer workings of the human body and beautifully distorts them into new, unrepresentational compositions. The folding of organs, wetness, and interlacing of fat and veins interest me, and Abela captures the beauty of our internal world in a very soft and sophisticated manner. His motivation behind the work is to highlight the transience of life, what comes to be and what will eventually pass. His works are reminiscent of abstracted works utilizing organic forms from the early 20th century, like Kandinsky’s *Composition VII*. Overall, Mario Abela’s work has inspired me to look at smaller, overlooked moments and find a way to abstract that into my compositions that can connect with my concepts. I created *Head* and *Gut* before I found Abela’s work, and once I found it, I recognized we have a similar way of seeing beauty in the grotesque and how intricately designed the human body is.

The L Word (2004-2009), created by Ilene Chaiken, Michele Abbott, and Kathy Greenberg, is a great inspiration for how well it displays a range of queerness, especially during the early 2000s. Located in Los Angeles, *The L Word* follows a group of characters with a range of sexualities, gender identities, careers, and situations. Of course, shows like these are dramatized for the sake of entertainment, but *The L Word* usually represents the core of queerness and lesbianism and accurately comments on lesbian culture. I often feel like current depictions of queerness have lost their rawness and felt discouraged from watching current queer media. *The L Word* allows queerness to be messy, dramatic, and unsubtle in a very refreshing manner I seek to display in some of my artwork. They do a great job displaying the range of what it means to be queer, what it means to mess up relationships through self-exploration, and sometimes self-destruction. Seasons 1 and 2 are the most impactful for me as they explore characters who are new to discovering their identity, how messy sexuality can be when

you are figuring yourself out, and its connection to mental health. I fear the current media is trying to make situations like this too pretty, but *The L Word* does not fear displaying the distress, loneliness, and complexities behind lesbianism. This is why I find it particularly important for all of my pieces that address intimacy and physical touch to be energetic, queer, and distorted. So, I can play around with my complex relationship with sexuality, but also let the viewer know that I am experiencing these feelings through a personal queer lens and it is of note that the figures are lesbian bodies.

Another part that inspires me is how *The L Word* highlights the intersectionality of queerness and art history in a subtle, realistic manner. In seasons 4-6, the show's theme and opening credits shows Catherine Opie's "Being and Having", which displays queer women in masculine drag. *The L Word* displays a range of identity, including women who identify as butch or masculine, as well as characters who are femme, androgynous, etc. Additionally, one of Opie's photographs, *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (Opie. 1993.) from 1993, is in an exhibition that one of the main characters, Bette Porter, who was a curator for a local art museum, put on display in the first season. This self-portrait displays Opie with her back faced toward the viewer, with a domestic scene of two women and a house cut into her back. *The L Word's* attention to detail in displaying true, queer art, is one of the many reasons I am drawn to the show and its dedication to queerness. I'm inspired by *The L Word's* open discussion of sexuality, relationships, identity, and intimacy, and want to include this nuanced accuracy to queerness in my work.

Overall, my exploration of my thoughts and what is most important for me to display artistically has greatly benefited how I view thought, the artistic process, and my relationships with others. I've learned how to get comfortable with taking subtle or overwhelming moments in my mind and putting them into original compositions to show to an audience. Ideally, this body of work will be read by an audience as a display of complex thoughts, experiences, and emotions that they can either relate to or further understand a different perspective. I do not seek for everyone to fully understand what I was thinking when creating each piece, because not everyone has experienced sensory experiences, intimacy, thought, and sentience the same way. But instead, I'd like for anyone viewing this body of work to find something out of it that will help them question what parts of themselves they could explore more. For future projects and research, I'd like to further connect thought, consciousness, and the body with queerness and do more work reflective of other queer lives and experiences outside of my own through discussions with other people. I believe this body of work is a catalyst for many works that can venture many pathways, where I can spend more time with the specific moments I am highlighting in this body of work.

Works Cited

Anhedönia, Hayden. "Perverts", *Ethel Cain*, 2025.

Abela, Mario. "Notes Through the Anthropocene", 2025,
<https://www.abelamario.com/feed>.

Chaiken, Ilene. *The L Word*, 2004.

Opie, Catherine. *Being and Having*, 1991.

Pepperell, Robert. "Consciousness as a Physical Process Caused by the Organization of Energy in the Brain." *Frontiers*, 15 Apr. 2025,
www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02091/full.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. 2014. "Understanding the Impact of Trauma." National Library of Medicine. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US). 2014.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>.