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Kier Cooke Sandvik
Bodyworks

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Note: In this essay I use the word 'viewer' to refer to anyone who experiences my work, though I don't think it's the right word as it reduces the experiencing of an artwork to simply seeing. Ideally, I would have a word that also encompasses the bodily reactions and sensations that can be involved in such a situation, but I will use 'viewer' in its place for lack of a better suited alternative.

Bodyworks

Kier Cooke Sandvik, 2019

'He had this weird thing where he would look at the stars, and imagine they were the lights of a city, and think about what kinds of people would live there.'

(...)

'You saw him naked, right?'

(...)

'You know all those scars on his body? His mom used to sell him to gay guys, and they beat him up, and did sadistic gay shit to him. Then he started doing things like that to himself.'

(...)

'I think he wanted people to look at them like he looked at the stars, and think about what kind of person would live in that body.'

-from Dennis Cooper's novel 'My Loose Thread' (2002)

I first began to work creatively as a teenager using notebooks as visual diaries filled with drawings and collages as a way to navigate my emotions and experiences which were confusing and debilitating. It was, strictly speaking, a necessary function of my life as a way to survive. Since, I have filled over a hundred books, and I quickly began to design these books as objects in themselves complete with titles, removable covers and elaborate closing mechanisms. To begin with it was a deeply introspective process, and simultaneously a public one as I would post selected scans of the books online on various social websites. It became necessary to obscure many things to manage the vulnerability that arose from sharing this intimate material, so I began to develop a cryptic language of signs and abstractions that continues to grow still. This distinct language carries through all my work and seems to expand the viewers' understanding of the work and its totality the more they see.

Initially the work took the shape of an unrefined outpouring of emotion. High in intensity, it made a strong emotional impact on the viewer in ways that I had little control over but found interesting and informative. I began to learn how to use my visual language to affect more intentionally, while avoiding manipulating the viewer or dictating ways of feeling and thinking. Every little part of my work corresponds specifically to things in my life and history, but I wish for it to be open enough to correspond to things in the viewer as well, even things we don't share, things I can't predict. I'm interested in affecting the viewer emotionally, in a way where they might not understand themselves how or why it does. There are many aspects of creating (e.g. composition, colour, the use of symbols) that can function almost as magic tricks; to insinuate something without being explicit, to trigger emotion, to reference or point to something while remaining oblique, and this is a key part of how I try to activate my work.

The most formative influence on the early development of my work was the American writer Dennis Cooper. In particular, his novels and his literary and artistic blog¹ of the past 17 years where he posts personal influences and fascinations, gives insights into his working processes, as well as interacting with anyone who comments there. His work's uninhibited exploration of bodies, confusion, sexuality and violence helped legitimize my artistic interests early on. Cooper's novels are filled with boys who have their bodies distorted in the fantasies - or mutilated in the hands - of others, both willingly and not. Their states of mind during these processes are ones of confusion, apathy, neediness, self-annihilation. In all the fictional representations of bodies and bodily relationships I'd been exposed to, these boys were perhaps the first I could personally relate to. The scarred body, the body that causes others to look at it and wonder what kind of person would live in that body, feels like my body. The bodies of my works have the essence of this question in them too, or perhaps the question is 'What kind of person would make these bodies?'

¹ <https://denniscooperblog.com/>



'Farm Fantasy' ('Advanced Essence,' 2018)

Materiality is very important both to my artistic practice and to my work. Working with my hands and using a wide variety of techniques, as well as an unrestricted range of materials, allows me to work intuitively and sensually, to make a direct connection to my emotional dimension, and to effectively communicate a certain physicality. All my aesthetic choices are deliberate, whether they are the result of intuition or attraction; intended to make a reference, create a mood, or attempt to produce a deliberate effect. In order to give an example of how I work I'm going to talk about this piece titled 'Farm Fantasy,' which is part of a larger ongoing project, 'Advanced Essence.'



Detail, 'Farm Fantasy'

The piece is composed of a collage affixed on a faux-leather clad canvas, using grommets and rope. There are several materials used; watercolours, wax, nail polish, ink, oil pastels and textile. Having worked on a farm for three years I'm drawn to imagery popularly associated with the idea of 'the farm,' as for example seen in the image at the centre bottom of the piece; a magazine cut-out of a Dolce & Gabbana ad. The ad shows a male and female model in jeans sensually lounging in hay - a sanitized image of a sexy farm fantasy. The red ink, which has the almost-perfect colour of fresh blood, the golden brown nail polish and the white wax that spill onto the hay in the ad reflect my own experience of the hay on a farm; never quite clean, often soaked with animal urine and shit, the blood and slime and afterbirth from lambing, the milk spilt from bottle-feeding lambs. When choosing materials, I wish to express a certain physicality to the viewer, and since the work can't be touched it cannot simply be a matter of tactility. I want it to feel as though it affects the body, like the work makes a direct physical link to the viewer.



Detail, 'Farm Fantasy'

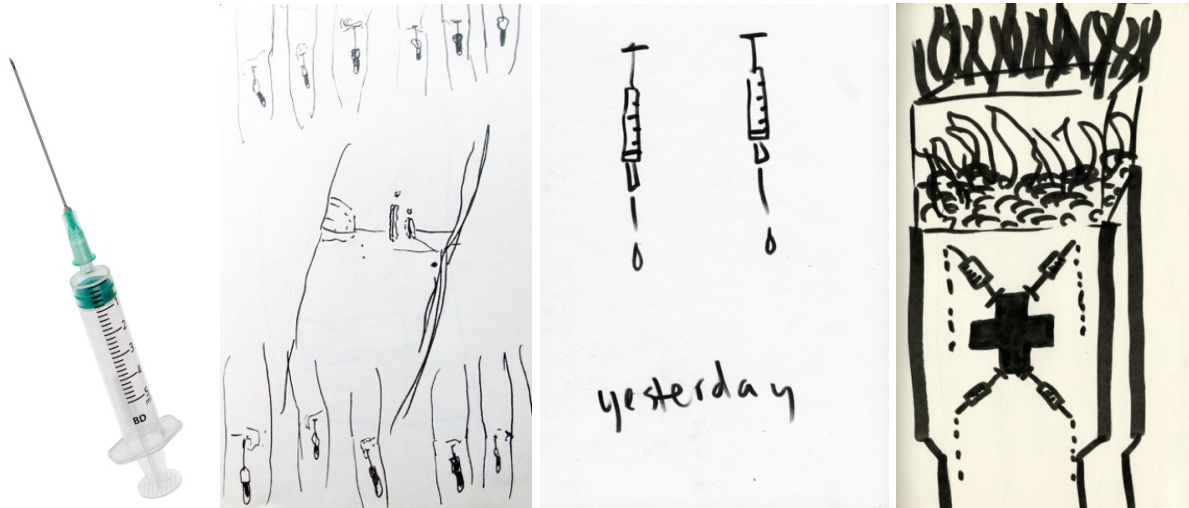
Other components of the work are a watercolour cowboy painting; a print-out of a photo I took on the farm where I worked of a black lamb named Vilde in a diaper; a magazine page with a photo of a barn from an advertisement for Calvin Klein. Two snake-shapes sit on top of the entire collage, one green and black, one bloody. The shape is drawn from a photograph of a snake swimming in water, here it becomes a symbol. The green one is made with oil pastels that were heated with a lighter so the waxy material turned soft and liquid and could be smudged over the paper, then topped with black ink. The pastel when cooled was lumpy and would peel off in areas, while the ink when applied was full of air bubbles that later cracked and crumbled away. I sealed the fragile green snake with a lacquer. As a photographer I work exclusively with analogue film, one of the main reasons of which is the near total unpredictability of results it offers, which is something I often seek in all kinds of materials. I didn't know how the snake would end up looking, I just wanted to see what would happen as I worked. I wanted to feel the warm wax on my fingers and to discover how it would behave. I find a lack of control like this to be highly potent.

My work is a form of 'exorcism' of my inner world, and the effect becomes a mapping-out of my experiences as references, which all have direct links to myself. I don't need for others to see or understand these links, and I don't intentionally make this possible either.



Left to right: An angel in David Lynch's film 'Fire Walk with Me' (1992); my drawings of the angel (2012-2014)

Some images I use over and over again, and they become symbols, almost like in comic books - as shorthand for certain things. In comics the symbol-language depends on being universally understood, as for example a spiral or an unwinding coil above a character's head indicating that they have just suffered a blow to the head or are out of their mind. My symbol-language isn't always so accessible, but continued immersion into my work will help to unravel some of their meanings.



Left to right: A syringe; syringes in my drawings (2009-2016)

I use them for speed of working, for the abstraction they offer and because I enjoy it. It isn't a pre-planned language, only one that occurs as I work and that grows organically. My notebooks have functioned as personal diaries, and since I don't use text in them very often, I needed a visual language that was as accommodating or more so than the written can be. I use the books to process the things that happen from day to day; the things I see, hear and read; the things I think about and feel.



'Fallen Angel' ('Advanced Essence,' 2018)

For the past year I have been working primarily on a multi-medium project titled 'Advanced Essence' which combines sculpture, drawing, painting, collage and object design. I use any material that appeals to me to create objects that are tactile and bodily, beautiful yet grotesque: wax, chalk, spray, acrylics, textiles, ceramics, jewellery, nail polish, ink, and so on. Some of the pieces take the shape of collages, in whittled and fabric-covered frames or mounted on clothed canvas, while others are sculptures resembling objects of fashion or furniture design.



'Egg Bag' ('Advanced Essence,' 2018) *'Crash Chair' ('Advanced Essence,' 2018)*

The works are full of references (an ancient Egyptian animal-sarcophagus; a low-cut dress revealing a thong worn by Gillian Anderson on the red carpet; a 1967 bias-cut wedding gown with hat by Cristobal Balenciaga) and I keep a substantial image archive for this project that I borrow from freely; taking colour combinations, silhouettes and symbols into my own work. My influences range widely from fashion and design, pop culture and advertising to ancient artefacts (the fashions of Lee Alexander McQueen; ancient South-American ceramics; video game magazine ads;

Isamu Noguchi's sculptural work and furniture design). The references are both personal and otherwise, and though transparently legible only to myself, they join together to create a distinct impression of a person, a world. All my work is a form of self-portraiture no matter how abstracted.



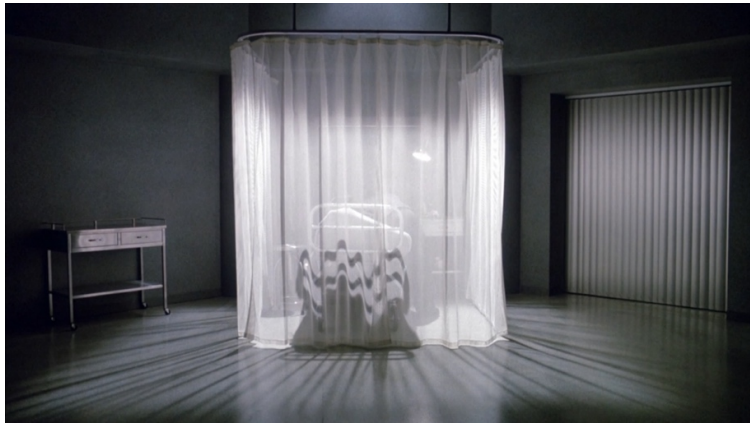
'Ritual Table'
(*'Advanced Essence,'* 2018)



Detail of a handstitched lampshade
(*'Advanced Essence,'* 2019)

This project is to be exhibited in the form of a room-installation within the gallery space, using fabric to form walls, where these curtains will be textile-works in their own right. Creating a very particular and immersive atmosphere is crucial for the work to function. Having spent a lot of time in hospitals these past few years for gender confirmation surgeries and hormone treatment, I'm increasingly excited by hospital aesthetics and design. This plays a large part in my plans for this 'room.' I want the space to have some feeling of a hospital room, both clinical and fetishistic,

and I am working with bandage material and medical suture-techniques, among other things, to achieve this.



Reference images

Left to right: A hospital room in David Cronenberg's film 'Dead Ringers' (1988); The bedroom of Adolf and Lina Loos, Austria (1904)

The fetishization of 'the hospital' and the medical is, like the idyllic and erotic fantasy of 'the farm,' very fascinating to me. Having had a good deal of experience in both arenas, and never finding them to easily lend themselves to such projections, I still am attracted to these types of imagery. Though it feels as though these ideas depend on a person not having had intimate experience with their space of origin to 'work,' my own experiences give them an unexpected depth and allure.



Reference images

Left to right: A bandage dress from Maison Martin Margiela's autumn/winter 2005 collection; A dress with contrast stitching from Alexander McQueen's spring/summer 2002 collection; Variations of medical sutures; A drawing by Japanese fetish artist Namio Harukawa

My biggest questions in working with this project are how effective I can be in creating a deeply affecting atmosphere, how well I can combine a multitude of mediums and techniques in one work, how well I can economize in my presentation of this project, how it will 'work' on its viewers, and how useful those reactions will be going forward to potentially show this project in new variations later.