

I FELT THAT

CURATED BY JOSEPHINE BAILEY

30 JUNE – 3 JULY 2022

An interview with Lavinia Harrington



Why did you apply for this project?

The title alone grabbed me immediately: 'I Felt That' is such a strong affirmation, these three words are so simple and yet surprisingly hard to say out loud. Over the last two years I've been inspired by a growing understanding of what it means to feel embodied and to experience dissociation – a tension I now understand arises in part from my experience of the gender pain gap. I suffered for years from debilitating periods and acute pelvic pain, and underwent a laparoscopy operation and helica treatment for suspected endometriosis - which I believe contributed, in part, to chronic pain. Enduring excruciating examinations and being repeatedly misdiagnosed led me to dissociate from parts of my body in order to cope. Projects like this encourage connection, community, and care. The opportunity to develop work alongside other artists really appealed to me, especially given how complicated and raw some of these experiences still feel. There's something empowering about connecting with a feeling and expressing it - coming together with other artists to say "I Felt That": we can simultaneously acknowledge what we have experienced, and point to what we have made out of it. The title also deeply resonates with my practice: I have strong, visceral responses to the tactility of the materials I use and I see my works as maps, charting felt experiences. This will be my first gallery exhibition, and I'm so happy it's a project I feel this passionate about.

Q: You have a very strong art historical background, has this helped you work through this project? Do you feel that your work is related to previous women artists (or even male artists..!)

A: Hah - well, having specialized in the Italian Renaissance, I've spent most of my academic and professional career looking predominantly at artworks by white western male artists. Over time, I've filled boxes and boxes with postcards, magazine cuttings and all sorts of images I collected whilst teaching abroad. At the start of this project I sieved through them, selecting those that struck a chord. I kept picking out representations of women's bodies that spoke to me of shame, or that exemplified the male gaze. I wanted to take some time to consider how I'd consumed and digested these images over the years, and the ways in which they might have impacted my own relationship to my body. I had fun ripping them up, re-assembling and working with them in the small collage booklet 'Memory lives in Muscles'. I'd also say, given the innumerable hours I've spent looking at Titian's mythological works, that his spellbinding ability to metamorphose paint into flesh, and convey states of transformation in such a visceral way, unquestionably helped me when grappling with colours throughout this project. I also found myself returning to Donatello's moving sculpture of Mary Magdalene. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to engage with artworks first hand on such a regular basis – it's certainly helped me to also build up an imaginary library of images to draw upon, whether consciously or unconsciously whilst I work. For example: I eventually realized that I'd been unintentionally wrestling with John Martin's *The Angel with the Book* whilst creating 'Tender Revelations'. But, it's been my focus on women artists that has felt

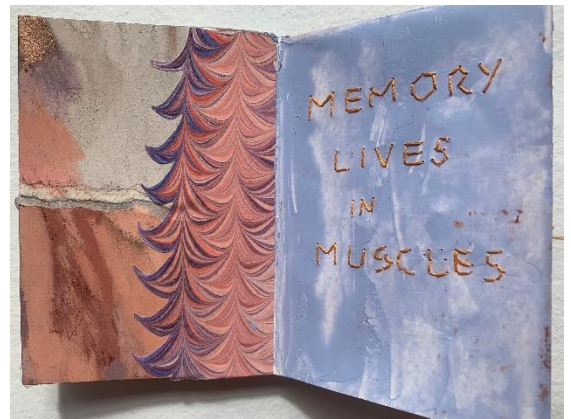
most empowering in terms of developing my own practice. I was drawn to pastels as a medium after handling one Joan Mitchell's breathtaking drawings in the gallery I worked for back in 2014. My recent pilgrimage to see her sensational exhibition in Baltimore was nothing short of lifechanging. Mitchell's commitment to paint what she felt has supported me throughout this project. I find the immediacy and intimacy of works on paper and embroidery really appealing, particularly works by: Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Bourgeois, Jenny Saville, Rachel Jones and Joana Choumali.

Q: Your work is very visceral and personal, could you take us through your process?

A: Since I can remember, colours and music have provoked visceral and at times overlapping sensory experiences; with colours evoking vivid textures and sounds, and music feeling tactile as fabric. It's hard for me to explain my process in words, as I work instinctively and often draw from entangled emotions and physical sensations in flux by fully immersing myself in the process. Each drawing, if I manage not to rip it up or overwork it, eventually finds its own rhythm. But getting to that stage can take a long time, the final marks emerge over many unresolved and unseen layers. I know a work is finished when it feels strangely familiar.

Q: Throughout the project, we have seen a lot of your smaller, embroidered works. Why did you start to move toward this medium?

A: I was taught how to embroider by a nun when I was at school in Italy - it's something my childhood friend and I loved doing together. Last summer I started to sew again, after almost thirty years, to make something for her first-born child. I wanted to incorporate sewing in this project because it felt nostalgic, but also because I love the way that threads weave in and out of surfaces, revealing only part of their journey. Sewing is at once forceful and gentle, destructive and healing, mechanical yet mindful. It was comforting to return to a medium I used in my childhood, and explore its possibilities for the first time in a larger pastel drawing but also in smaller, more intimate works like the two booklets I made. In 'Tender, I felt Tender', I found some resolution in freely writing out a vulnerable account of a medical examination and then sewing the words shut. It's a flimsy piece of paper really – but it carries such weight for me. I'm still in the process of making a cross-stitch cover for a piece of drift wood I found on the beach recently. The piece is called 'Sinking back into my Skin' and I'm embroidering whilst listening to a number of audio books and podcasts that address the gender pain gap and women's illness. It's soothing to work with my hands whilst processing at times disturbing statistics and information. The slower pace of completing an embroidery piece is a wonderful reminder to take things gently and at a pace that works for me.



*Lavinia Harrington, Memory lives in muscles
Booklet (pp.5-6), April 2020, Mixed media, 15x21
cm*

Q: Can you speak about the work you are exhibiting currently - under what circumstance was it made?

A: I actually started this drawing shortly after hearing about this project, but before I found out that I'd been selected. I couldn't stop thinking about those three words: 'I felt that'. They felt heavy, bright, and commanding – there was a joyfulness and a sorrow about them that fascinated me. All this compelled me to listen to Southern Italian *musica popolare* (traditional folk music) as I started drawing. I remember hearing it for the first time on the streets of Naples and feeling haunted and alive – it made me want to dance. So the drawing evolved as a sort of dance and conversation – an expression of 'felt' experiences (physical and emotional) that I'd been unable to communicate fully using words. Throughout this piece, I found myself thinking back to my Italian ancestors, especially the women in my family, and thinking about the ways in which they might or might not have been able to say 'I felt that'. I'm interested in understanding the relationship between the body and trauma, how the body stores and communicates trauma in one's lifetime but also how trauma is passed on through generations, as well as the relationship between trauma and transformation. Dance can offer a potent means for women to engage with their bodies and express themselves. This piece feels like the start of a long journey for me.

Q: Has there been any other artists' work or research that has inspired you throughout the project?

A: Not one – but twelve! I've been consistently moved and inspired by Zayn, Shir, Ruth, Polina, Mhairi, Lucy, Lucienne, Louise, Quingqin, Jenny, Jen and Chloe. Their support and encouragement throughout the project repeatedly sustained me as I handled delicate memories in my work. It was a privilege to witness their process and learn more about the gender pain gap through their own personal experiences too. Now, it's exciting that all our works will be in conversation with each other in the same space. And of course, Joséphine, *your* bringing us all together and holding a safe space for us has been indispensably motivating.

Q: What would you tell any other person who has experienced "the gender pain gap"?

A: I don't think I fully understood what the 'gender pain gap' was until I embarked on this project. It's a tough reality to digest and unpack. Even acknowledging your experience of it can feel overwhelming – so, I guess the first thing I'd want to share is that you're not alone! There are formidable communities and individuals out there who can support you and who are dedicated to generating change. I find remembering this on a bad day fills me with hope. Medical settings can feel intimidating, especially if you've suffered trauma, and/or your pain has been dismissed and belittled. I found discussing my symptoms with close friends before medical appointments really helped me not to doubt and second guess myself on the day. Years of therapy and starting a yoga practice have also been life-changing as they've enabled me to counteract my tendency to dissociate from physical experiences, and introduced me to useful vocabulary when articulating physical sensations. All this has felt exhausting at times, so it's been vital to learn how to practice self-compassion. Small gestures, like bringing a hot water bottle into the waiting room, or holding my hand on my lower abdomen with care before a cervical screening have helped me feel more connected to my body, and have enabled me to communicate more confidently with doctors.