

## **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.

**Keywords: Trauma, PTSD, Layer**

### **1. Introduction**

In these drawings trauma is visually represented, particularly the repercussions of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). By drawing the figure as a subject the viewer can immediately connect and relate to the piece. Emotions that are expressed through lines of charcoal and pastel that are packed into layers of gouache and ink represent the aggressive and suffocating nature of PTSD.

PTSD is a currently very prevalent in our society. 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.<sup>1</sup> Through different methods of art therapy, such as drawing, individuals are able to confront, express and understand their experiences.

The word “Trauma” can be traced back to its Greek meaning, which is translated as “wound”.<sup>2</sup> 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 one to confront trauma because they are able to visualize internal emotion without having to express it verbally. The internal symptoms of trauma range from feelings such as hyper vigilance, depression, nervousness, paranoia, exhaustion, disassociation and an overall instability. The series states *Invisible Injuries* gives visual form to these symptoms through line, composition and layering of materials.

Art benefits a traumatized individual because of the way a traumatic event affects the brain. The amygdala and hippocampus in the limbic system inside the brain are affected when trauma 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 car accidents.

Art therapy promotes hemisphere integration, linking the verbal with the non-verbal.<sup>4</sup> 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.

## **2. Methodology**

This research was motivated by a car accident that the artist endured at the age of 16. PTSD was developed as a result of this accident. The impact of the speed from the opposite driver caused the artist to be crushed and trapped inside the car. A severe concussion was caused by the crash that wiped out all memory of it ever taking place. A broken arm was also received from the accident, leaving the artist with a scar from surgery that would constantly be questioned. The pain of explaining this scar to curious individuals and trying to remember the accident created a lot of emotional stress and confusion for the artist.

Although confronting the constant reminders of this event was painful, it was also helping work through emotions caused by the accident. Mentally repeating a traumatic event in one's mind is something that helps a victim come to an understanding.<sup>5</sup> Since one's 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 the pain it can cause. Like a physical wound, the traumatic memory is something that requires attention to heal. Even though explaining this story was a very exhausting and disturbing task, over time it became something the artist was comfortable with and even proud of.

This confidence only increased with the introduction of art. Anxiety in the artist's work was first noticed in Life Drawing classes where the ability to focus and relax is challenged due to the time limit of the class and the constant critique by an instructor. This created a tendency for the mark making to be linear and chaotic, trying to always correct lines with more lines. At the end of the session, all that was left was a series of a million marks (fig.1).

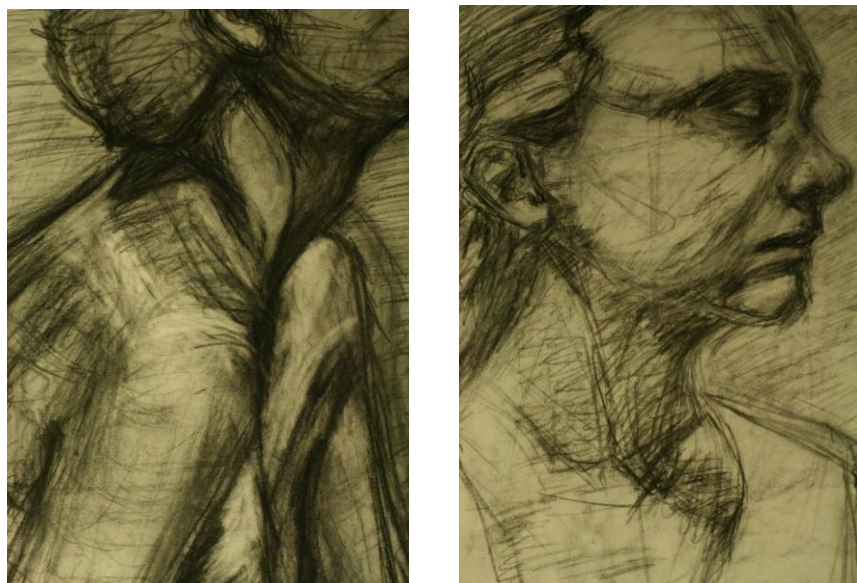


Figure 1. Ashley Hinceman, *Life Drawing Sketches*, 2011, Charcoal, 30"x20" each.

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

Through printmaking techniques such as etching and mezzotint, continually reworking and layering a surface was established in the process. The mezzotints created were a combination of spheres and conduits described as noodles (fig 2). These were creations from the imagination and the constant creation of them became cathartic and complicated. Images such as spaghetti and bodily entrails were referenced for compositional structure. Like emotions from the artist's trauma, these forms were knotted, twisted, and unable to be unraveled. Drawing allowed for the pressure felt from the tightness of these knots to be loosened. The patterns of lines with these images followed a confusing path of twists and turns. The chaos represented within the work was reflected in the artist as well. The noodle prints slowly became representational of this obvious suffocation and chaos that was felt within the artist.

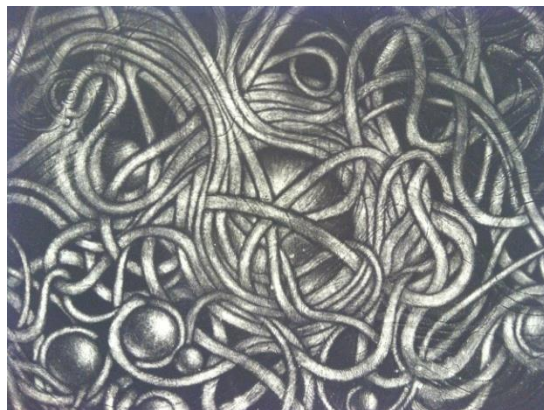


Figure 2. Ashley Hinceman, *Noodles 3*, 2010, Intaglio print with black ink, 30"x20"

Once this realization was established, a body of work was created that would allow for some relief of tension from trauma that had been held inside for years. Energy from the noodle prints was translated into drawing figures as portraits that imitate the several emotions anxiety from trauma can cause. The process starts by collecting photographic sources of different individuals in positions that are uncomfortable or awkward (fig. 3). The positions reflect the mental frustration and the limits of exhaustion one's body can be pushed into from enduring trauma. The photographs are used as a reference to exaggerate and manipulate the form of the figure to match certain emotions that define PTSD. For example, in the drawing *Tim* (fig. 4), the figure's legs are elongated and thinned out to express the exhaustion and weakness anxiety can cause. By abstracting the figure, the emotional affects of PTSD are accentuated 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.



Figure 3. Ashley Hinceman, *Tim*, Pastel, Charcoal, Gouache with reference photograph, 36" x 24"





Figure 4. Ashley Hinceman, *Tim*, 2012, pastel, charcoal, gouache, (Detail).

The pieces start with a light charcoal rendering of the figure. From there the figure is built between experimentation of layers in drawing, painting and printing. Layer by layer visual tension increases, symbolizing the overwhelming depth of emotions that can result 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 created through layers of marks and designs of ink produced from printing. Through freely painting with gouaches, watercolors and printing patterns of ink, the environment is abstracted, 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 after experiencing a traumatic event.

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 from the truths and events that are too painful to accept or deal with. This response is involuntary and is 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.

### 3.Influences

Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti was a figure painter in the 1930's until late 1960's who incorporated the same linear style the artist uses in the drawings. His paintings exhibit emotions such as isolation, anxiety and frustration. They rarely seem finished and illustrate extreme unequal proportions and psychological tension within line that creates a disturbing, almost nightmarish atmosphere. Giacometti, had a very tactile approach to painting and 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 and reflective of the artist. Since Giacometti as a person was obsessive, bitter and almost never satisfied with anything he did, consequently his work displayed the same attributes, and became signature characteristics of his pieces. His aggravated and temperamental personality fed into the paintings, a medium that's meant to communicate the senses and the mind.

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.<sup>6</sup> 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 used in *Invisible Injuries* that is effective in adding anxiety to the piece because it forces the viewer to be aware 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* (fig. 5) and *Head of Diego* (fig. 6), 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.

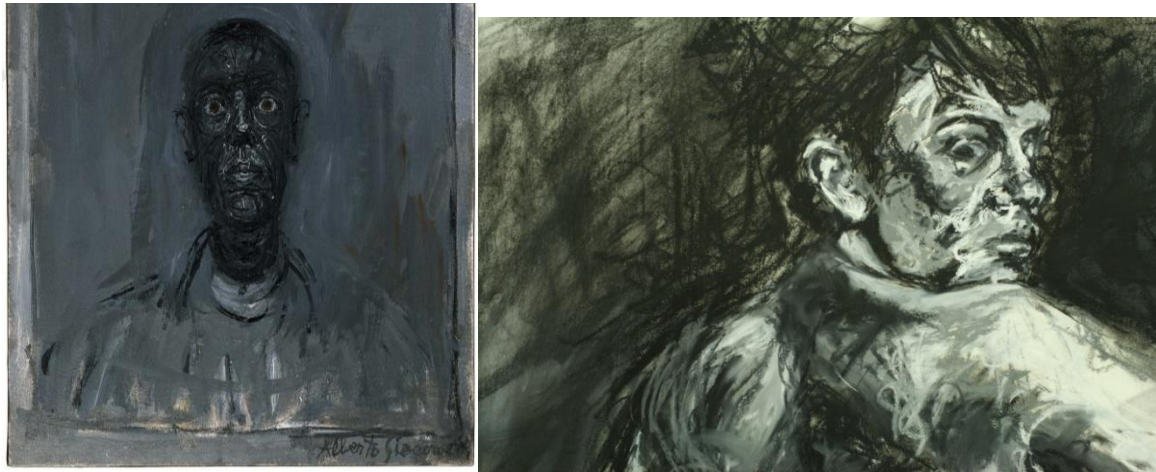


Figure 5. (Above) Alberto Giacometti, *Head of Diego*, 1961, Oil on Canvas, 17 ¾" x 13 ¾"

Figure 6. (Below) Ashley Hinceman, *Hallie*, 2012

#### 4. Conclusion

This research has helped the artist find control in mark making that brings attention to a method of therapy that is very helpful in dealing with PTSD. Through mastering mark making while drawing, control within the artist is found as well. Drawing is one method for an individual to gain control over traumatic emotions and provides an opportunity to overcome the tension that can manifest in one's body and mind caused by trauma. It is an immediate and liberating process for releasing imagery that for some is too painful to put into words. The effects of PTSD are mostly internal. A large amount of panic and anxiety runs through the human form that is hard to grasp. Art is one way for a traumatized individual to approach the thoughts and emotions of traumatic experiences that don't require verbal communication. The artist uses drawing devices as tools for releasing such energy, allowing for moments of quieted apprehension. The frustration felt with the artist's past is manifested within the drawings where tension is not only safe but also encouraged and emancipated. By creating this series, the beneficial effects art therapy can have are visually represented not only by the figure drawn, but by the marks of the artist as well. The viewer can leave the 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. Acknowledgements

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