

# **PENS, PENCILS, AND PAIN(T)**

By

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### **Abstract**

Pens, Pencils, & Pain(t) is an exploration of and reflection on my experiences with chronic low back pain through art. While those close to me knew about my pain, I struggled to describe my experiences and even found I had trouble coping emotionally.

To create an effective body of work, I used the design-thinking method. This begins with defining the problem, then coming up with ideas, testing and making prototypes, building/creating the idea, and lastly analyzing the work. The analysis was crucial in this process, as it forced me to reflect on the creative process and how I responded to the problem at hand.

The resulting body of work is raw and reflects not just a struggle with pain, but an internal conflict between acceptance and rejection. The pieces, unframed, with ragged edges, and nailed to the wall emphasize the harsh reality of the situation. At times the work conflicts stylistically, showing my discomfort at confronting powerful emotions.

The design-thinking method combined with the creative process helped me better understand my conflict between rejecting and accepting my emotional responses towards pain. By acknowledging and confronting this internal struggle, I found that I could validate my own experiences.

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### **Statement of Purpose**

By keeping an art journal, creating a body of artwork to portray my struggles with chronic low back pain, and analyzing these through the design-thinking method, I critically reflected on my internal struggle to cope with the emotional and physical aspects of pain. The design-thinking method was the foundation of this critical reflection, as it forced me to not only analyze my artwork, but to confront my emotional responses to these experiences. The resulting body of artwork gave me more than insight into my chronic pain. The process of creating art through the design-thinking method empowered me to validate my experiences.

## Introduction

### Introduction: Personal Background

Even though I have gone through the moment in my head at least a thousand times, I am only now thinking of it as sensory overload. I do not know if that is even the right word, the accurate word, but I can feel that word in the memory of that moment, the same way that I can still feel the panic. I sat there at the benchtop, not even a half hour through a two-hour physics lecture, and I was sure I was going to lose my sanity. In that moment, nothing else existed except for that overwhelming pain. It consumed me. I knew that the professor was talking, just like I knew that I should be paying attention and taking notes, but I could not hear anything over the blood drumming through my ears. My thoughts were literal chaos unleashed: *it hurts so much, it's too much, everything is too much, racing, everything is, it's all too much, I can't do this, I can't—I can't think, I can't do this, I can't keep doing this, my head is, I can't, I can't*. Eventually I stopped understanding those words too. Pencil down, hands tangled in my hair on either side of my head, staring at nothing but the benchtop, I felt like I was drowning.

I have been living with chronic low back pain for over four years now, and while I wish that that moment was an isolated one, the worst of the worst, it was just one of many. There were so many moments like that, usually moments where I found myself hidden under blankets, curled up tight, tighter, like if I just made myself smaller I could melt away. Sometimes the pain is aching, sometimes throbbing, and sometimes it feels like being broken in half, or like being torn apart with slow deliberation. As I am writing this, I can feel my breathing picking up, and that desire to hide is back, even though I

know that there is nowhere for me to hide where the pain will not find me.

The pain started during my senior year of high school, and to the puzzlement of seemingly every health professional, my pain is not the result of an injury. I woke up like this one day during that senior year, and the only potential cause for that pain was a partially herniated disc, found months after the onset of pain in my first MRI. I have seen massage therapists, chiropractors, a spinal surgeon, physical therapists, an orthopedic doctor, a pain management specialist, a rheumatologist, and personal trainers, all with little to no reduction in pain.

The first two years of pain, though challenging, were nothing compared to the third year, which brings this explanation back to the physics lecture. I made it out of the classroom after two hours, though I was stopped at the door by the professor, who had noticed my odd behavior. I told him I was fine, just under the weather, and went back to my dorm. If I could sum up last year in a word, it would be 'fine'. I told myself that I was fine, just like I told the professor I was fine, like I told the lunch lady I was fine, like I told my friends I was fine, like I told my coach I was fine. But the pain got worse. I got worse.

I told myself that I was coping, that I was fine, but as these moments of drowning in pain continued, I knew that whatever I was, the word for it was not 'fine'. Whatever I was doing, it was not coping. That realization, though freeing, was also terrifying. After so many draining attempts at finding answers in the medical field, I knew I needed to try something different.

### **Introduction: Literature Review**

What many people fail to understand about chronic pain is that it is all encompassing; it has no limits, no restrictions, and no timeline, and therefore seeps into every aspect of life. It takes away not only patience, but trust, hope, energy, and life (“The long-term effects of untreated chronic pain”, 2014). It seems obvious, then, that people suffering from chronic pain must learn to manage their pain and cope with their reality redefined by pain.

However, chronic pain is more than coping with and managing pain. People living with chronic pain may experience anxiety, isolation, depression, hopelessness, frustration, anger, and fear as a result of living with chronic pain (Pasquale, 2009). Amy Rheume (2016) further explains the connection between the mind and the body in terms of chronic conditions:

[Additional complications], in turn can result in increased pain, further loss of motivation, increased fatigue and additional changes in sleeping or eating patterns all of which make managing [one’s] chronic illness even more difficult. The result becomes a self-reinforcing, vicious cycle of intensifying symptoms and negative emotions. (para. 4)

Chronic pain, like other chronic conditions, thus demonstrates the importance of understanding the concept of mind-body connection, in which the “thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes can positively or negatively affect...biological functioning” (Hart, 2015). In simplest terms, mental state and physical well-being are closely connected (Hart, 2015).

Mind-body therapies and techniques focus on the role of the mind-body

connection to improve physical well-being. Generally, this is done through activities that help people recognize their mental states and learn to redirect damaging thoughts and emotions. Some mind-body therapies include but are not limited to tai chi, meditation, yoga, biofeedback, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and creative art therapies, including art therapy. The key to these therapies is increasing awareness of the relationship between mental state and physical health (Hart, 2015). As described by Dr. James Gordon, “all the organs of [the] body and all the emotional responses [people] have, share a common chemical language and are constantly communicating with one another” (as cited in Hart, 2015).

Art is one such outlet for enhancing this mind-body connection for people living with chronic pain. It is important to remember that dealing with chronic pain can leave people with difficult emotions and experiences which they may struggle to cope with and express (American Chronic Pain Association, 2013a). However, art therapy provides a way for people to express these emotions and experiences which they otherwise may not know how to express. Art therapy as a mind-body therapy is “the deliberate use of art-making to address psychological and emotional needs, facilitated by an art therapist” (Art Therapy Alliance, n.d.). Unlike some treatments which seek a set numerical outcome, art therapy seeks more subjective outcomes, like “fostering self-expression, creat[ing] coping skills, manag[ing] sense of self, and strengthen[ing] sense of self” (Art Therapy Alliance, n.d.). The end result of art therapy is not a number, graph, or chart, but a piece of art that expresses feelings and ideas, and yet the art itself is not the goal of art therapy. The purpose of art therapy is helping people through the process of making art, during

which they can gain awareness and insight into their emotional and mental state. Art, similarly, does not seek an ending the way that the scientific method does. It is about the process of creating rather than what is created.

The process of creating is in itself a means of escaping from reality, creating a new reality, or even both. Focusing on the creative process generally helps distract people from their pain, and eventually, rather than escaping reality, they are able to confront their reality (American Chronic Pain Association, 2013b).

Dealing with pain through the process of making art is not new. Frida Kahlo, perhaps one of the most well-known artists who dealt with chronic pain through art, portrayed her experiences in often gruesome and disturbing paintings (“Frida Kahlo biography, art, and analysis of works”, n.d.). However, her work depicts not a life of giving in to pain, but of living in spite of it, and most importantly, finding herself in art.

Carlos Fuentes (1995) notes this as one of her most defining skills, as her self-portraits “are beautiful for the same reason as Rembrandt’s: They show us the successive identities of a human who is not yet, but who is becoming” (p. 16). Rather than painting for the sake of resolution, her work shows not only the continuation of the creative process, but of her own process of becoming her own person. Fuentes (1995) also acknowledges that “through her art, Kahlo seems to come to terms with her own reality: The horrible, the painful, can lead us to the truth of self-knowledge” (p. 16). Her art was not a means of demonstrating her feelings to those around her in the hopes of gaining their understanding, but instead reflects personal dialogues with herself. Sarah M. Lowe (1995) draws a similar conclusion about Kahlo’s personal journal, claiming that “Kahlo’s

motivation has less to do with communication than with negotiating her relationship to herself” (p. 25). Kahlo’s work therefore embodies mind-body therapy, as her work allowed her a way to communicate with herself and reconcile her emotions in response to her life’s traumatic events.

Nevertheless, pain can stem from different sources of personal conflict, as in the case of Vincent van Gogh. While van Gogh is well known for his works like *Starry Night*, one of his greatest struggles can be seen in a series of three paintings, *Van Gogh’s Bedrooms*. Throughout his life, van Gogh wandered like a vagrant, seemingly unable to find a true sense of home (“Van Gogh's bedrooms”, n.d.). Like Kahlo, van Gogh does not seek to communicate this personal dilemma through art as an end product, but rather explores it within himself through the series of the three paintings. The first bedroom, painted when he arrived at the famous “Yellow House”; the second, when he was at the asylum in Saint-Remy; and the third, made a few weeks after the second as a present to his sister and mother, are each unique, despite being based on the same room (“Van Gogh's bedrooms”, n.d.). These differences, some subtle and some obvious, are believed to depict changes in his relationship to the idea of home and his intense desire to have a sense of place. Again, his art reflects changes within his own mindset, and is indicative of his process of looking for home. At no point is there any indication that he intended to paint the room three times, but rather that as his feelings and concept of home changed, his visual representation of it changed as well (“Van Gogh's bedrooms”, n.d.). His art shows the process, then, not of finding a home, but of how he changed the way that he related to home as a concept, how he mourned its loss in his life, and yet continued to

hope and search for it. The process evokes an eternal hope and his inner search for a feeling of home. Like Kahlo, Van Gogh's emotional search happens within the creative process, while the paintings he produced are merely evidence of his trials and self-exploration.

In many cases, the creative process is not necessarily about an escape from reality. It is a way of dealing with reality and saying what cannot be said with words or that which is too difficult or painful to say. Where pain may seem like a dead end, art can provide an alternate route, acting as a travelling companion and making the process more endurable. It is not about finding the destination, but about learning how to enjoy the journey.

### **Method/Procedure**

In order to provide structure and direction for the creative process, I used the design-thinking method throughout every step of the project. The design-thinking method used in this project was defined by five major stages, all of which are explained below.

1.) Delineate: At this stage, I defined the problem at hand. While this step began with defining the problem in the statement of purpose, I also began every journal sketch and exhibition piece by defining the problem at hand. This allowed me to focus on a specific message or idea for each sketch and exhibition piece. However, if I found that I was struggling to present an idea the way I wanted to through art, I would reexamine the delineation step to better understand what it was I wanted to portray.

2.) Investigate: This step involved research. Though this step involved research in the form of reading and reflecting on current literature, as in the literature review, it also involved artistic research. Taking ART 290, Drawing II, for example, required artistic research in the form of experimenting with different media, like oil pastel, prismacolor pencil, watercolor, and micron pen. By learning about new materials from the class projects and other students, I opened up new media options for exploration once I began planning for larger exhibition pieces.

3.) Ideate & Create: In this step, I explored different ideas for art pieces and brought those ideas to life. Through journaling different sketches and ideas, I

explored concepts that could be used on larger scale in the final exhibition. By expanding on ideas that were underdeveloped, I was able to evaluate different ideas, as well as different materials to be used to create those ideas.

4.) Designate & Generate: Designating involved choosing what the final result/design would be, and generating that result/design for an exhibition of the final body of work I created. Some pieces found in the exhibit involved several attempts at ideation and creation, whereas other ideas went straight to designating and generating without revision.

5.) Evaluate: The final step of the design-thinking method required me to reflect on what I have learned throughout the creative process and how it has been valuable to me. While I evaluated each sketch and exhibition piece not only through its creation process, but also after its final creation, personal evaluation became more important throughout the creative process. I not only reflected on my art, but reflected on my struggles to create art, my emotional responses to the art I made, and my responses to pain within my own life.

The design-thinking method did not require that I work sequentially through the five stages, so I was able to go back and forth between stages as needed. In terms of the larger exhibition pieces, for example, I often started generating a new piece based off prior journal sketches and ideas. However, if I found myself struggling to generate an idea effectively, I would go back to my journal to brainstorm and create the idea again, or even investigate the use of different media and materials.

Exhibition pieces were also created using the design-thinking method, and often

involved more than one attempt at creation. Each piece would start from an idea, usually based off another idea or sketch from the journal, but some pieces were generated without referencing prior sketches in the journal. However, these pieces also required ideation & creation by experimenting with different kinds of paper, media, and design. Some of these pieces required little experimentation and fewer attempts to successfully generate, though this was uncommon. This would be akin to the first draft of an essay becoming the final draft with little to no revision. Most of the larger pieces were not developed in this manner, and required many rounds of investigation, ideation & creation, designation & generation, and evaluation in order to develop a final exhibition piece.

The evaluation stage, however, was the most crucial stage throughout the project. Instead of using the evaluation stage as the end-stage of all the others, it was more so a way to evaluate and reflect on the piece after every revision and reworking of a piece. Furthermore, the evaluation stage necessitated deep and meaningful personal reflection that went beyond reflecting on the piece as a physical creation, but as the embodiment of my struggles with difficult experiences.

### Analysis

Analysis of the exhibition pieces is not limited to the artwork itself, but extends to how the pieces were displayed. Rather than hanging the pieces in frames, the pieces were left bare, with no matting and torn, rough edges, and then nailed into the wall. This display was purposeful, as the rawness of the rough edges and the lack of frames presented pieces that were intentionally unfinished. I have not resolved my experiences with pain, nor my feelings towards pain, and leaving the pieces in a state of incompleteness mirrors this. Leaving the pieces in this state of nakedness, without the protection of glass and solid wood, also exposes the vulnerability that is present throughout each piece. Exposing each piece to puncturing nails takes this another step further. Like adding insult to injury, the nails add permanent damage to the vulnerable piece that cannot be undone, just as the pieces show my own perception of being vulnerable to continuous damage.

The media used is also significant, as I used gravity and the properties of watercolors and ink to create splatters, drips, and wrinkling of the paper. For me, allowing gravity and the liquid media to take control of how the media would interact with the piece was also symbolic of relinquishing control within my own pain experiences. I cannot control my pain, much like I cannot control every splatter and every drip, but I can control how I respond to it, as I can control how the rest of each piece responds to each new drip and splatter. This also created pieces that showed reaction to the circumstances created by the nature of the media, rather than complete

control over the media itself. In much the same way, I lack control over my pain and some of the circumstances I have found myself in because of it, and have often struggled with this lack of control.

In addition to the media, damage done to each piece was intentional, from using needle and thread to stitch parts of pieces together, to ripping pieces apart and putting them back together with clothespins. This intentional damage not only represents physical pain in some cases, but also mental and emotional struggles. In some cases, like *Drowning* (see Figure 1), tearing is a physical representation of feeling overwhelmed beyond repair, whereas in *Pin-up Girl* (see Figure 2), it is a physical representation of physical pain. In some cases, like *Permanent* (see Figure 3), the ripping is less obvious, but is meant to add dimension and make the center of focus seem as though it is somewhat removed from what is happening in the rest of the piece, unable to accept the situation at hand.

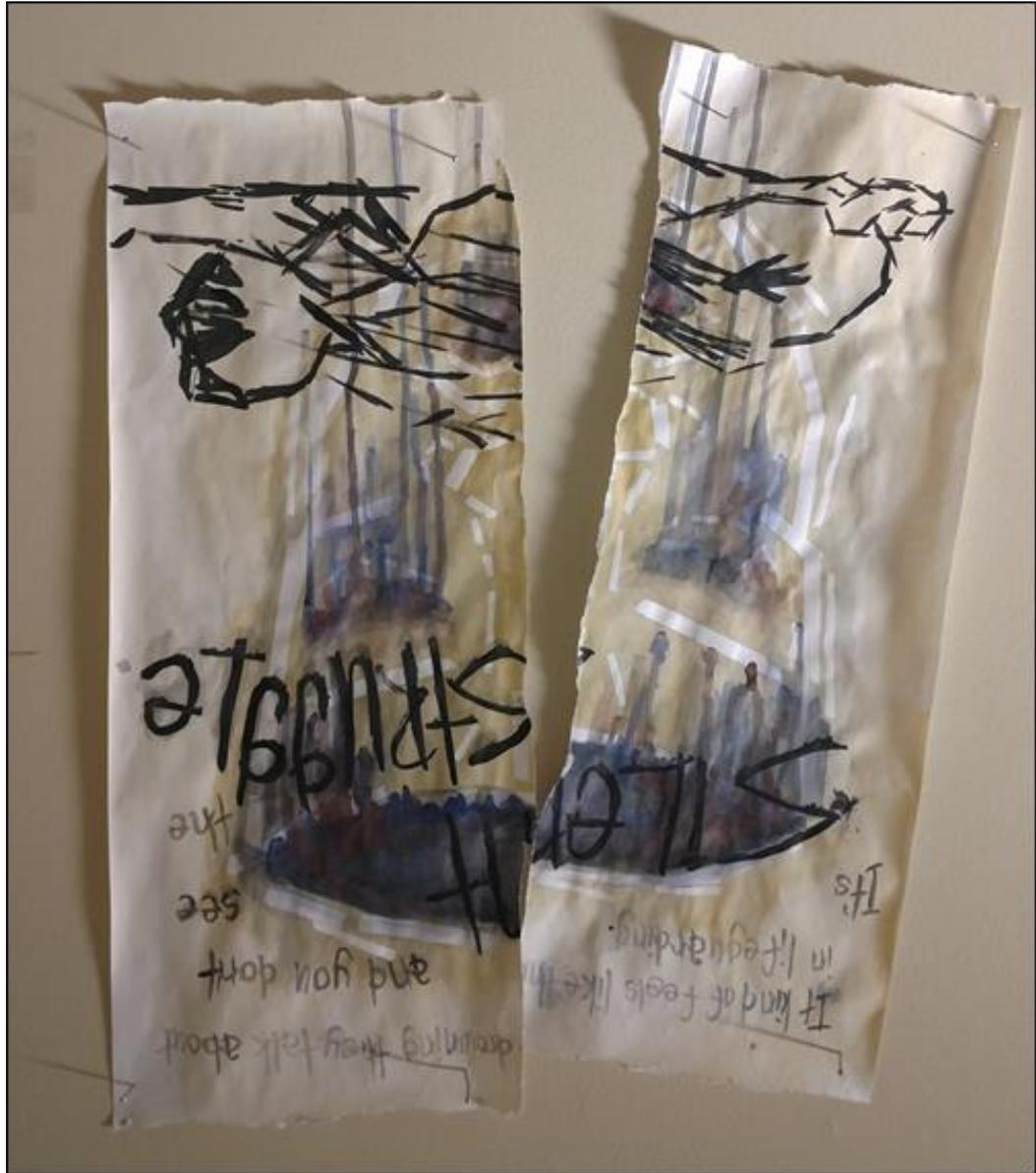


Figure 1. Exhibition piece: *Drowning*. Media: Ink, watercolor.



*Figure 2.* Exhibition piece: *Pin-up Girl*. Media: Mixed media.

Lastly, the style of the pieces as a group is intentionally rough to reflect the rawness of my experiences with pain. However, the pieces sometimes conflict stylistically, as in the case of *Permanent* (see Figure 3). While the central figure and the

hands on its back are composed of bold, edgy lines, the mermaid in the center of the back of the figure is neater and almost cartoonish (see Figure 4). This piece was emotionally draining to design and create, as it presented feelings that made me feel distinctly vulnerable. In my discomfort with that vulnerability, I tried to make something perfect rather than something real, which is how the mermaid became so neat in comparison to the rest of the piece. As I do in my everyday life, I had tried to compensate for my emotions and vulnerability by portraying something softer and more controlled, whereas the rest of the piece transitions from greater control and order to less control and order. This clash between the styles present in the piece, along with the rapid transition from light to dark and order to disorder, show my personal struggle between rejection and acceptance of my pain.

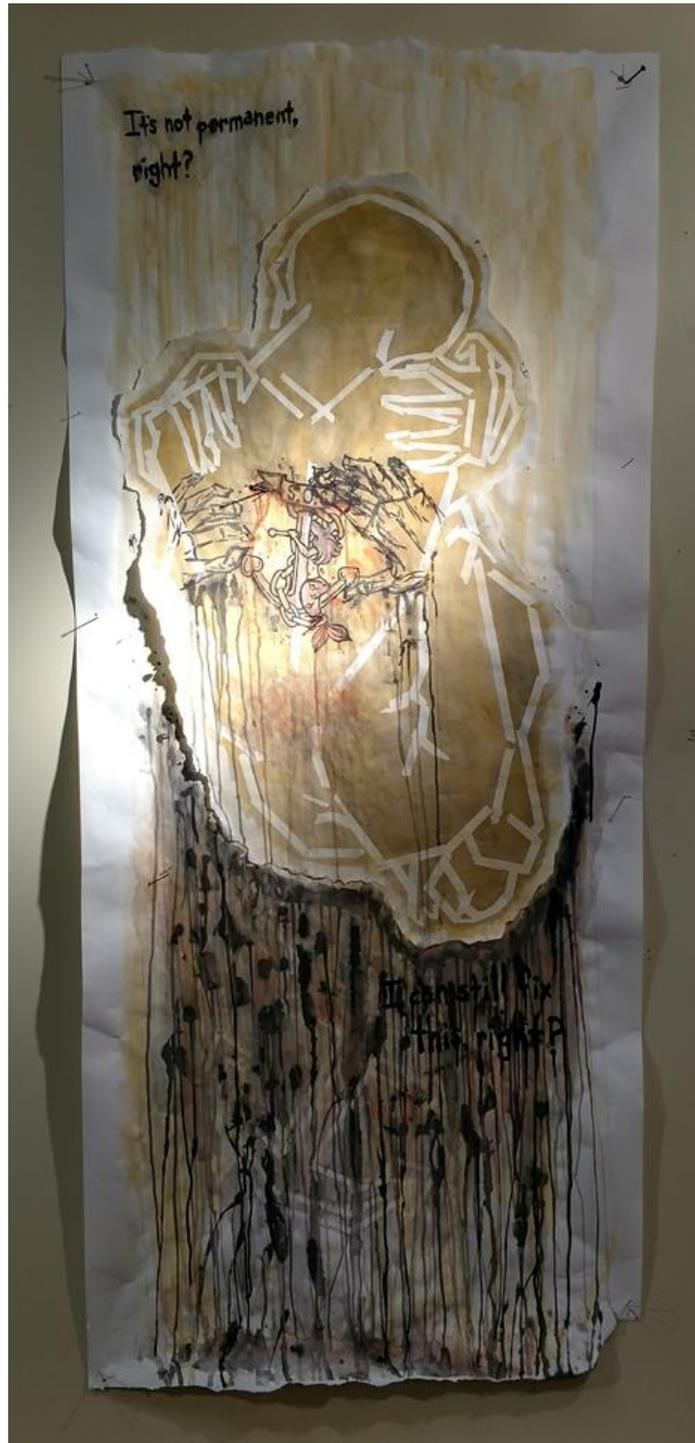


Figure 3. Exhibition piece: *Permanent*. Media: Ink, watercolor.



Figure 4. Exhibition piece: *Permanent*, close-up. Media: Ink, watercolor.

### Reflection

As I continue to create art, whether as a means of reflecting on and understanding my pain or not, it is important that I continue to be honest in what I create. While art can distract from pain, it also serves as a means for confronting the reality of the situation (American Chronic Pain Association, 2013b). Too often throughout this project, I found myself afraid to make exactly what I saw in my head because to bring that image into existence would mean acknowledging that the feelings and experiences behind those images were real. However, without honestly portraying these feelings and experiences, I could not confront the reality of my pain. As Fuentes (1995) notes, “the horrible, the painful, can lead us to the truth of self-knowledge” (p. 16). Without accepting that horrible and painful experiences existed in my life, though, I could not gain self-knowledge.

It took several nights of standing in front of an unfinished *Permanent* to finally realize that I was desperately trying to hide my fears, anxieties, and pain from myself, which was making it impossible to move forward with the piece. I told myself that I had accepted my pain, but standing in front of that paper, suffocating in my own lie, I knew I had not. I wanted to show that I had, but it was not true. Realizing this while sitting on the tile floor of my dorm, in front of that large piece of paper, I saw something that I had tried to make “pretty”. My pain was not “pretty”, though. I was caught in an excruciating limbo; unable to reject or accept my experiences and feelings, I was instead resigning myself to not feeling anything. But not feeling was not working, and it was not

going to make that large paper any less daunting. I had to embrace the process of opening old wounds and plastering them all over that paper, and I had to accept that being that vulnerable was okay. I had to know that it was okay to expose those wounds to the open air, to that paper, and to myself. It was okay, in other words, to be honest about not being okay.

While I was afraid of being honest with myself, I was also afraid of how others would perceive my work. I was afraid of what others would think, as if their validation of my art would validate my pain. It was a crippling thought process, one that had the potential to derail the entire design-thinking method. In fearing others' reactions, I was also searching for their approval, and this became a way to search for an ending.

Working for the sake of an ending did not work with the design-thinking method, because like art, the method emphasizes the process of creating rather than the created product. However, after little to no success from various treatments, I desperately wanted to feel like my pain and experiences were valid. Though I was struggling to deal with my difficult experiences and feelings that resulted from living with chronic pain, I felt like I could not express myself openly. If my pain and experiences were not valid, I reasoned, then my responses to them were not valid either.

The more I attempted to draw and paint with the intent of gaining someone else's understanding, though, the more I realized that I was looking outwards when I should have been looking inwards. Kahlo did not seek acceptance or understanding from others, but rather sought to reflect on personal dialogues with herself, and Van Gogh's work likewise points to inward reflection and his changes in mindset. Similarly, art therapy

aims to “manage” and “strengthen sense of self” through the creation of art, but does not focus on others’ perceptions of the creative product (Art Therapy Alliance, n.d.). When I finally let go of trying to gain approval, I found that by acknowledging and accepting my experiences for what they were, I was validating them myself. What was important, then, was not how others perceived my work, but the process through which that work was created.

In light of this project, I also need to continue exploring not only the role of art in my journey with pain, but the role that it may play in other peoples’ journeys. As I continue my education to become a doctor of physical therapy, I will encounter many people who have struggled as I have struggled, with little to no improvement from medical treatments. To better care for these individuals, it is important that I consider methods for holistic care that cater not only to physical needs, but mental and emotional needs as well. Rather than rejecting art as a means for understanding difficult experiences, I can be a voice within the profession that stands up for the merit of art in patients’ understanding of their experiences.

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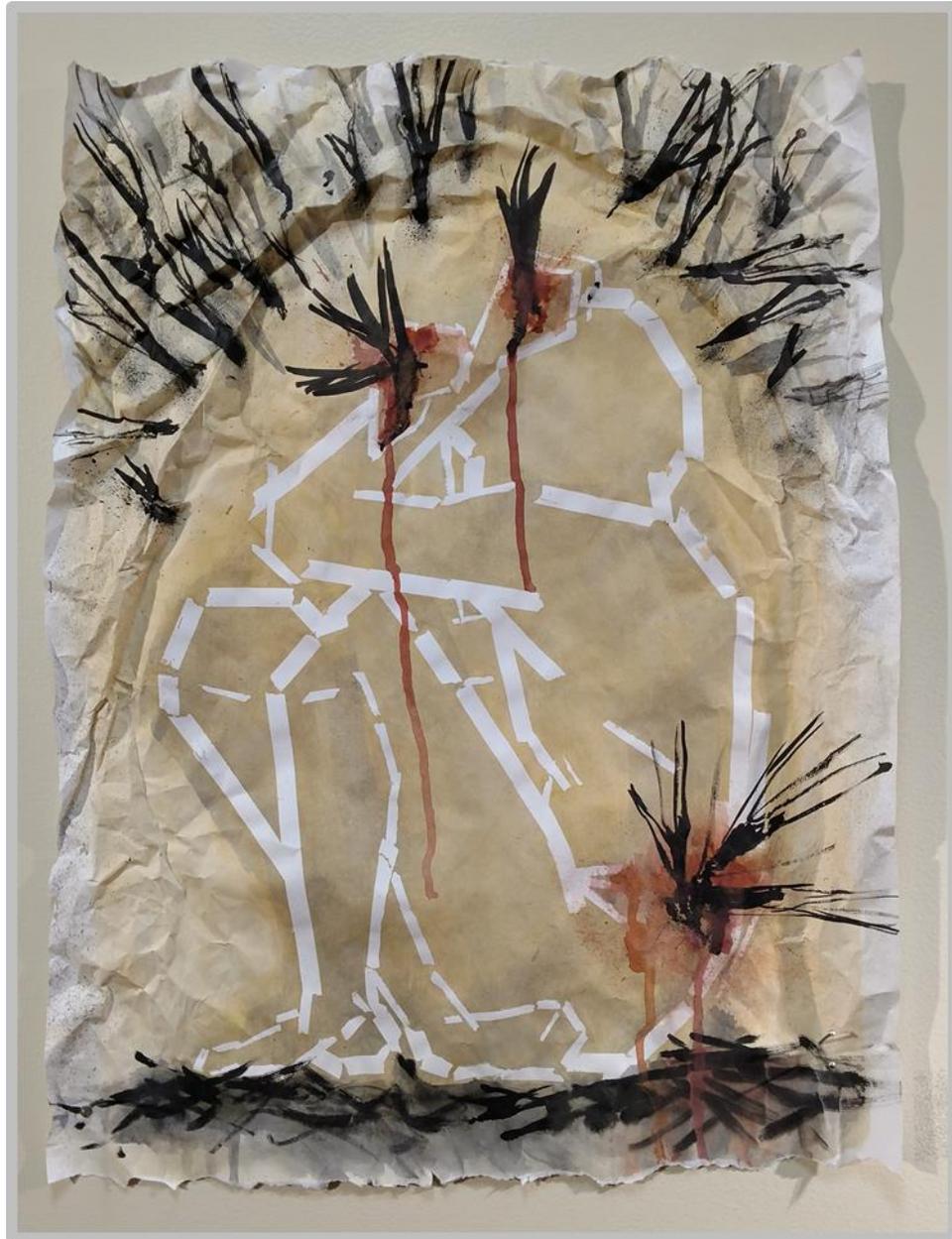
### **Appendix A: Product Produced**

Through this project, I created a journal of sketches and analyses, eleven pieces for exhibition, an exhibition of my work throughout this project, and a presentation for Scholar's Day. For the eleven exhibition pieces, see Appendix B.

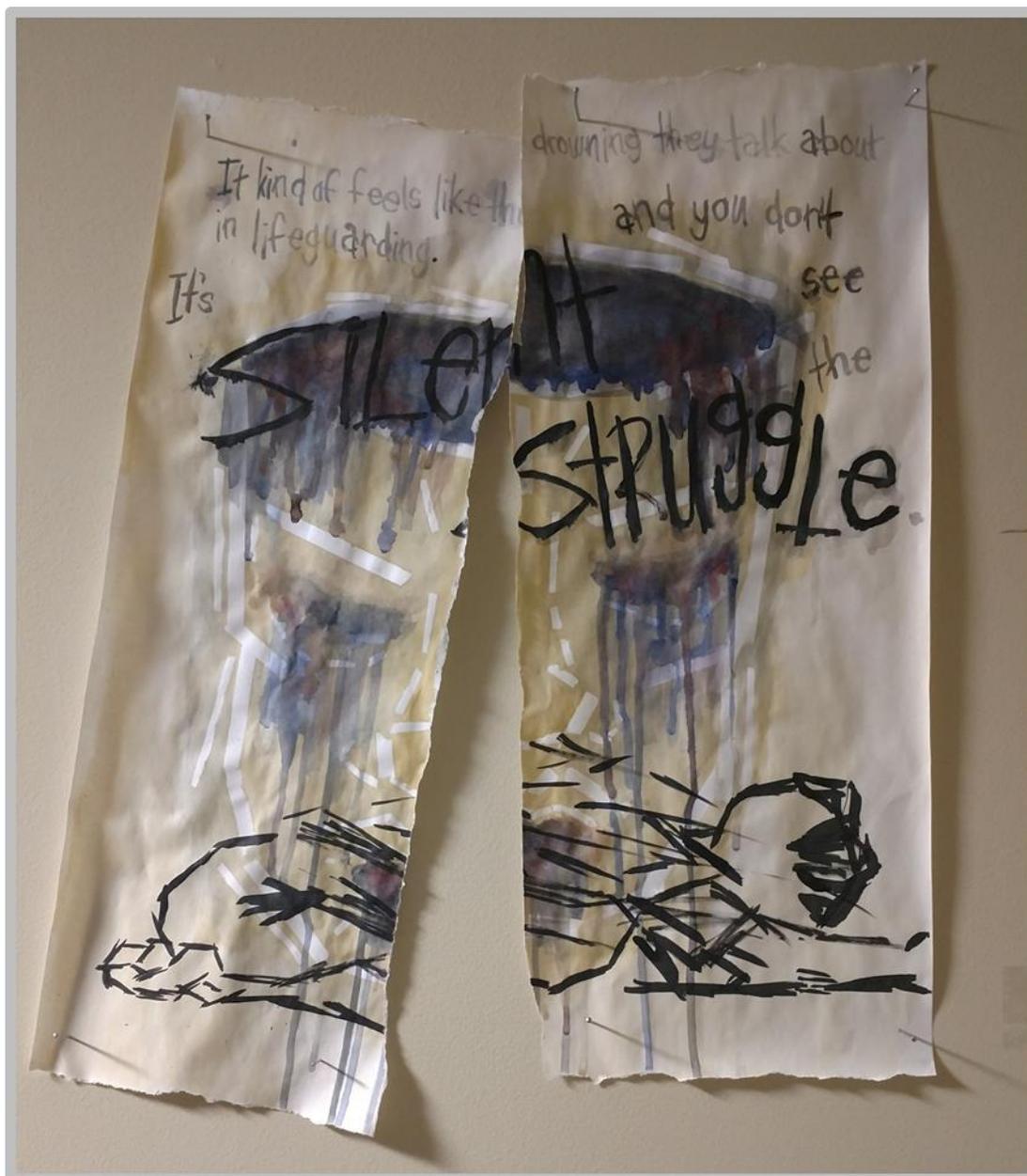
**Appendix B: Exhibition Pieces**



Exhibition piece, *Drowning*. Media: Ink, watercolor.



Exhibition piece, *Safe Space*. Media: Ink, watercolor.



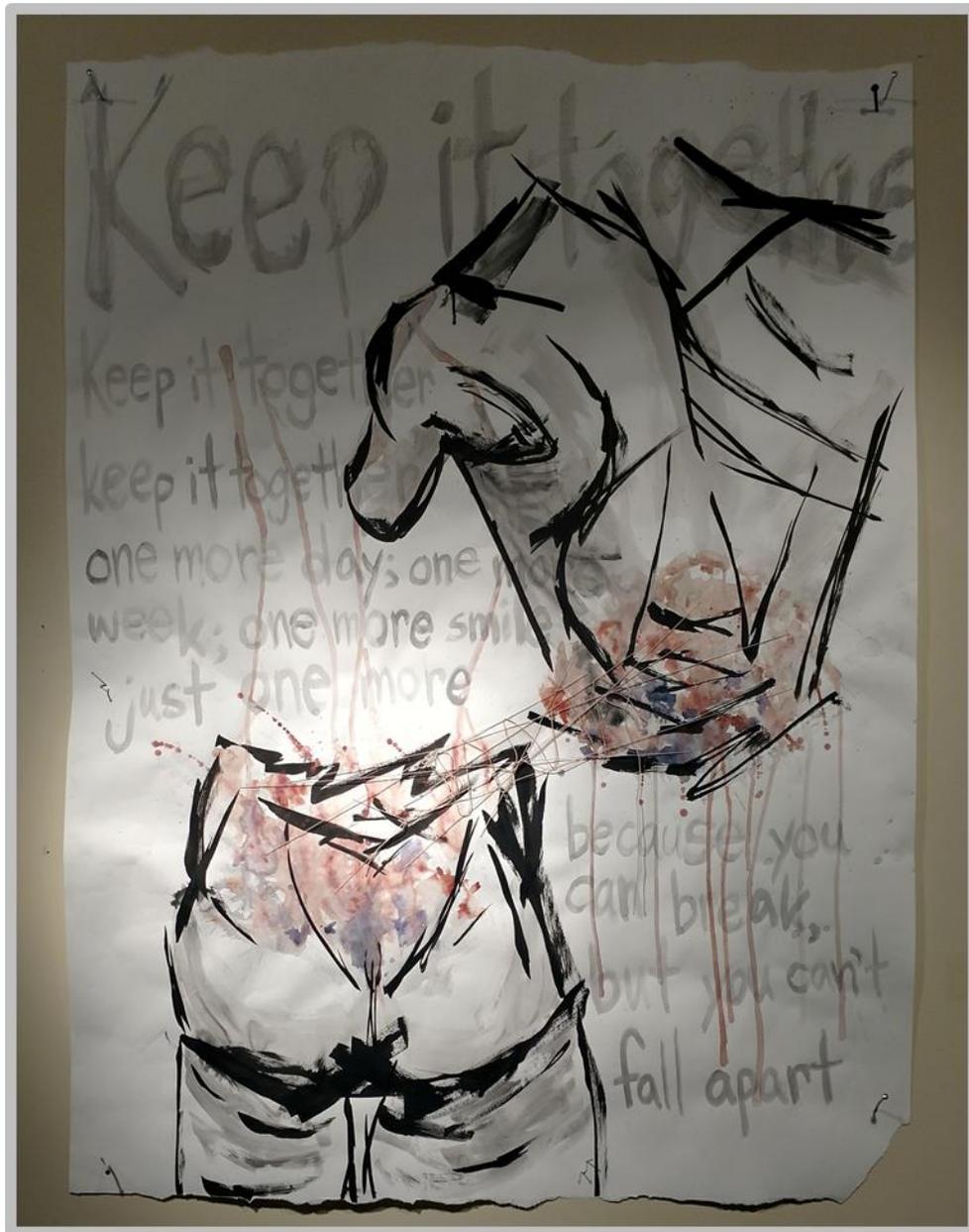
Exhibition piece, *Drowning*. Media: Ink, watercolor.



Exhibition piece, *Pin-up Girl*. Media: Mixed media.



Exhibition piece, *Sacrilege*. Media: Mixed media.



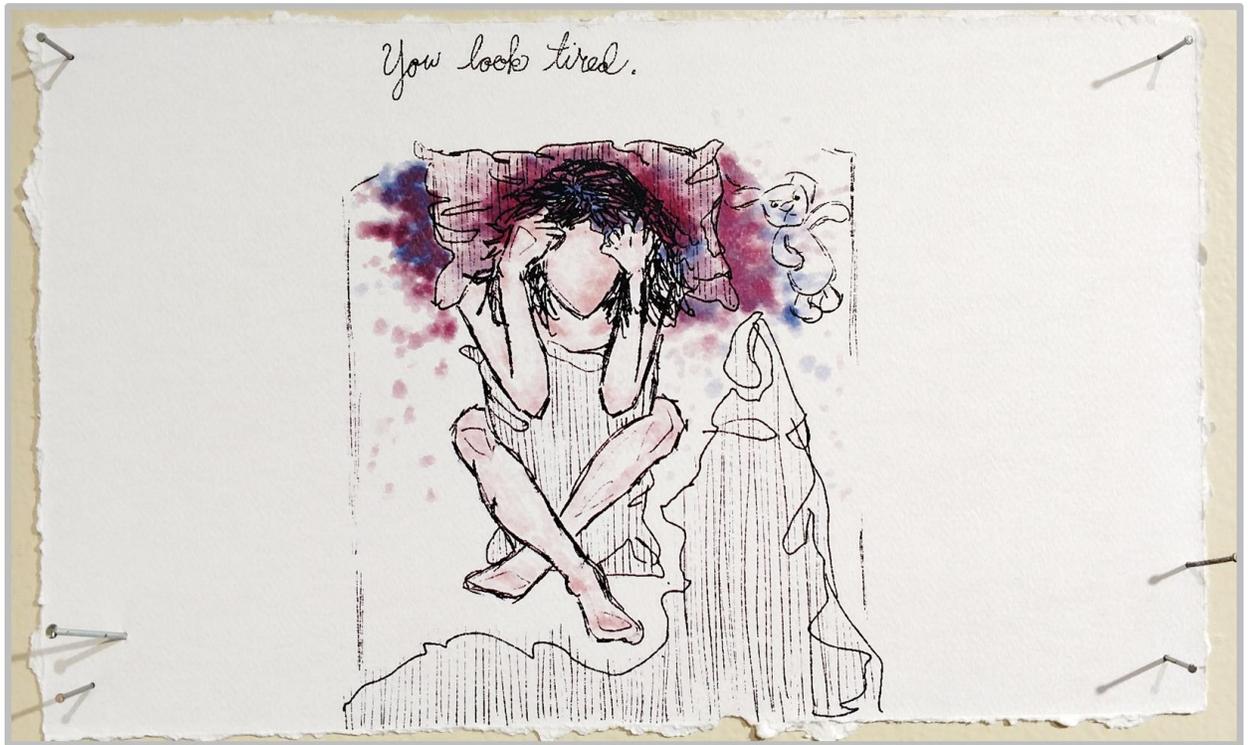
Exhibition piece, *Breaking; Broken*. Media: Mixed media.



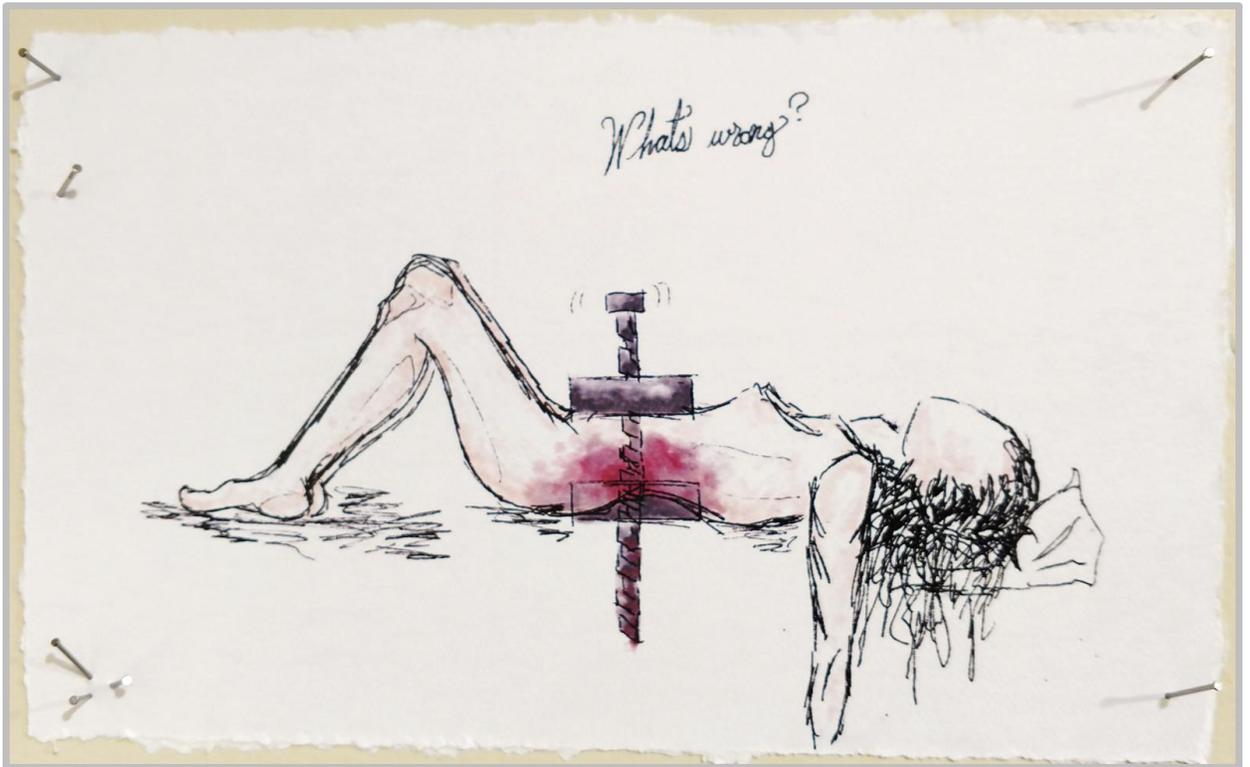
Exhibition piece, *It's fine; everything's fine*. Media: Mixed media.



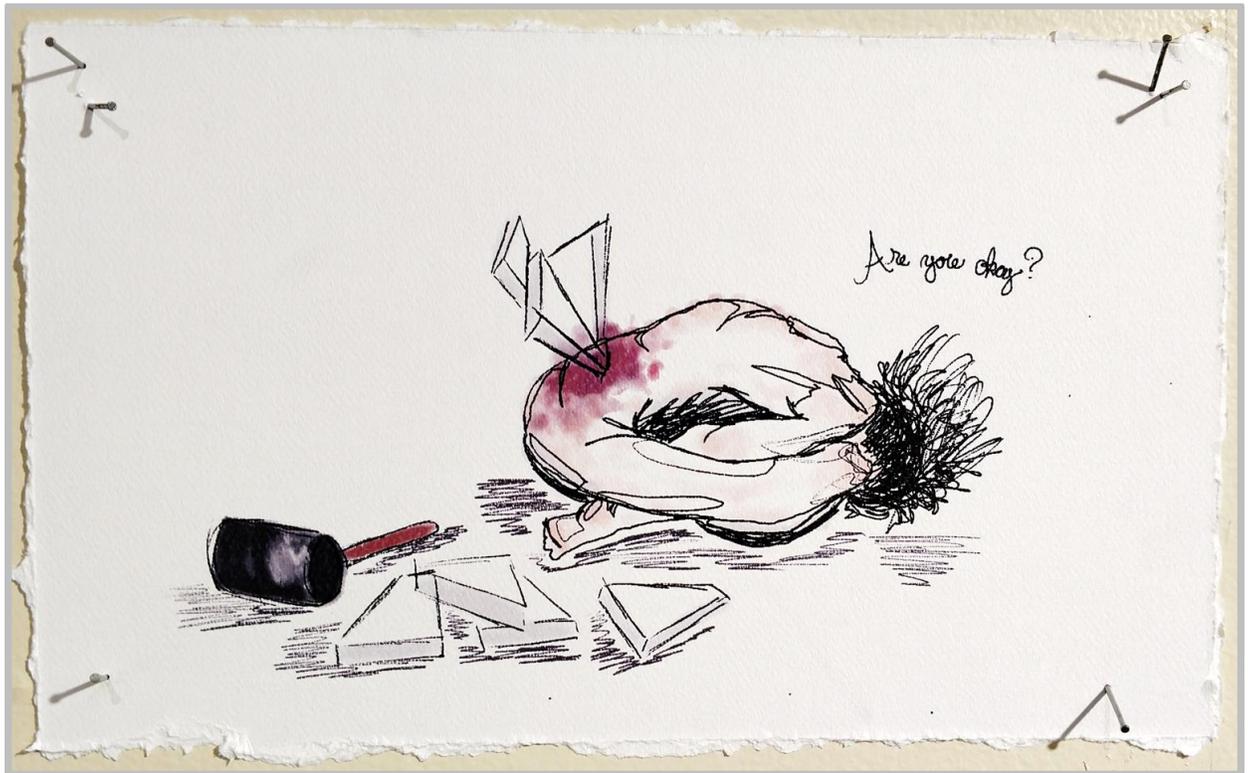
Exhibition piece, *Rate your pain for me?*. Media: Ink, watercolor.



Exhibition piece, *Long Nights*. Media: Digital, inkjet printer.



Exhibition piece, "What's wrong?". Media: Digital, inkjet printer.



Exhibition piece, *Door Stops*. Media: Digital, inkjet printer.