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Take Care

Nicole Wetzel

Western Michigan University, nwetz2017@gmail.com

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Nicole Wetzel
Thesis Reflection

When I sat down with my committee to make plans for how to approach my thesis exhibition, I needed to deeply consider what was important to me and my art practice. Although this was just my undergraduate show, not some career-defining solo exhibition at the MoMA, it obviously still had to be thematically interesting to me. This is how we came to decide on the concept for *Take Care*—documenting the intentional observation of our mundane behaviors surrounding personal care and hygiene. Thorough observation and visual translation have always been key factors in my creative process. Whether it's a simple still-life drawing or more meaningful image-making, paying attention to every subtle detail is a large part of my visual aesthetic. Even the plainest of scenes, like two feet standing next to each other, their differing positions changing how the light pours over their lines and creases, sparks my interest. So I study it, photograph it, draw it. Frankly, that's what inspired my first piece dealing with this theme, *Lather, Rinse, Repeat* (2020), made nearly two years before its exhibition in my BFA show; I was intrigued by the way my shed hair looked as I gathered it on my shower wall to throw away afterward.

This concept turned into a second piece early the following year, *Two Minutes, Twice A Day* (2021), this time focusing on the motion of spit-out toothpaste as it swirls toward the sink drain. Both of these images, though a bit boring or disgusting on the surface level, intentionally capture important moments of care toward ourselves. Since we cannot complete these efforts for health without also embracing their nastier remnants, they too must be observed and commemorated. This idea stuck with me, and as I embarked on creating the rest of my thesis artwork a year later, I explored new ways of depicting these actions toward hygiene. Both *Detangle* (2022) and *Wash Day* (2022) evolve the image of discarded hair, blowing it up to massive proportions. *Detangle* includes an embossment, raising the strands of hair from a two-dimensional image to a three-dimensional texture. The panels composing *Wash Day* are laid out in a grid, emulating an enormous wall of shower tiles with swathes of hair and water droplets splashed across it.

Meanwhile, the act of brushing one's teeth is again celebrated in *Spit Cycle* (2022) and its companion, *Stills from Spit Cycle* (2022). The former, an artist's book handbound with mint-waxed dental floss, honors the habitual nature of these actions by illustrating mouthful after mouthful of toothpaste rinsed away. Considering the materiality of this piece was crucial, leading me to swap bookbinding thread for dental floss, choose paper that would help the images flow together, and make covers that allude to a bathroom countertop. The countless videos from which the book's painted images come are represented by the eight freeze-frames in *Stills from Spit Cycle*, emphasizing the repetition of not only these healthy routines, but of the process of making the artwork as well; printmedia is nothing if not the art of the multiple. The series *Trim and File* depicts six collections of nail clippings, each containing more than the last, as the task of trimming one's nails is completed. This imagery was uniquely suited to the medium I chose—*intaglio*—a process by which I scratched and carved the linework into a plexiglass plate. Instead of using six separate plexiglass panes for the series, I used a single plate

which accumulated the imagery of bodily refuse. As the collection of trimmings grows over time in real life, so did the amount of incised markings on the plate. Of course, I opted to carve them with the traditional drypoint needle rather than my own fingernails.

Looking back on my thesis exhibition, I noticed that throughout that process, and in many other pieces, I put research on the backburner. Complementing a new idea for a project with research on past and contemporary artists or movements that produced similar work to what you're trying to create helps forge new thematic connections and inspire changes in visual style. It's difficult to create art in a vacuum, so seeking out more information relative to my thesis likely would've pushed my artwork, or at least the thought process behind it, to another level. This is advice that I strive to use in all my future creative endeavors in hopes of further developing my voice as an artist. Originally, I had planned on making another piece for the exhibition, a sculptural work referencing the mirrored medicine cabinet and how it houses all the tools we use for hygiene maintenance. Perhaps if I had done the research to fully develop that idea, it would've come to fruition.

Nevertheless, I am beyond proud of what I accomplished for my BFA thesis show. It was a truly daunting task to switch gears from singular projects to creating a cohesive body of artwork. Then I had to add in needing to fill the whole gallery by myself when my exhibition partner was no longer going to share the space. Aside from developing the skills to plan, execute, and curate a unified suite of images, the biggest thing I learned is that, through all the roadblocks, anxieties, and last-minute changes, I can do it. *I did it*. I obviously wouldn't have been quite as successful without the help of my committee and other support systems, but in the face of my most difficult academic challenge to date, I came through. As an artist, I struggle with a lot of self-doubt about my creativity and abilities. Completing my BFA exhibition, and doing it well, was a much-needed reminder that, while I still have a lot of room to grow, I am capable of doing work that is worth being proud of. I hope to keep this reminder in my back pocket as I move forward in my artistic practice.