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The Rusty Nail: Representations of Homelessness and the Aesthetics of Suffering

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Abstract

The Rusty Nail: Representations of Homelessness and the Aesthetics of Suffering collates years of practice-based research about the social realities of homelessness, looking at the experiences of homeless men, of frontline workers who deal directly with those experiencing homelessness and how homelessness is framed in broader cultural attitudes and societal structures. I take an auto-ethnographic approach, drawing on my own experiences as a front-line worker and with trauma, using my practice as an artist to shed new light on my encounters with homeless men and the spiritual and intellectual insights that have arisen from this. The paper contains a reflective prologue that considers how trauma and homelessness intersect, which is what moved me to create the “Rusty Nail” series and a reflective essay on the social position and aestheticization of suffering. The bulk of the essay combines extracts from my journals, presented in relation to a selection from my drawings, shedding light on these works in relation to my research. The “Rusty Nail” series is composed of drawings and sculptural works that emerge from a complex set of overlapping narratives. It is the way that I use art to gain some control over the chaos of emotion that I feel daily. In the constructing of meaning through material I can bring what I think is discarded and overlooked to the forefront. A worthless bucket of rusty nails that may find new life and hope.

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Author's Declaration:

"I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution."

- Eduardo Della Foresta

Prologue

Nothing that I had seen or read really prepared me for the reality I encountered when I started working with people experiencing homelessness. There was no manual that broke down the vast network of variables at play for each individual in this situation, and, I've learned, this means that services and solutions provided to people trying to get out of homelessness often fall short because they misunderstand these particularities. For example, the availability of social housing is an important hurdle to clear. However, if someone has an unknown traumatic brain injury, they might not be able to successfully maintain a residence. If the injury is not treated, accommodated for, or even known about, the individual might be labelled problematic, unruly, or fiscally irresponsible—so the real priority might be to get an MRI, to first diagnose the nature of their struggle. The misunderstanding of the root causes of homelessness causes us to fall back on moralizing about people's behaviours, and so the reactions from society become punitive. We blame people for their circumstances and learn to normalise the suffering of homelessness as a natural feature of society. The intention of this project is to show the humanity and complexity of the lives of people experiencing homelessness, bringing together academic, artistic and practical research methods, informed by my seven years working on the frontlines with homeless individuals. My work in this field has been incredibly life changing, bringing to the surface the many assumptions and biases that I unknowingly held about homelessness as I became aware of the overwhelming lack of care in society for people experiencing it. I also came to understand that this lack of care for the marginalised is a by-product of capitalism, allowing homelessness to persist as a feature, not a bug, in society. My hope is that the readers of my research will allow themselves to bracket their preconceptions about homelessness and that they will find clarity and empathy within the sentences below.

There has been much research regarding various aspects of homelessness and its development since World War Two into what we see now. However, it continues to persist and grow. It is in the details of every individual's life that you see the true face of what we

have labelled as homelessness. Art that has been created on this subject¹, with some exceptions, tends not to convey this nuance. Instead, this work often deals with the superficial realities of what the artist sees as a societal issue. My approach to this subject, as a researcher and an artist, inevitably has a different feel because of my experience as a caseworker, and as someone living with the experience of psychological trauma, a traumatic brain injury, and now working my way out of working-class poverty. Social approaches to homelessness often fall into “out of sight, out of mind”, which is to say, the focus is often to remove people experiencing homelessness out of the public eye. Furthermore, policy and social norms around homelessness are often set by people who don’t have an intimate understanding of the complex realities of poverty and homelessness, and may even have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Showing how trauma is at the base of homelessness, and how hybrid approaches to researching and understanding this subject can provide deep knowledge to policy makers, workers on the front-lines of social services, and more importantly, perhaps bring peace to those who suffer continually. My goal with this project was to bring the voices of the most marginalized that are seldom heard to the fore. However, trauma is not a fixed spot in an individual's life, and so the limitations of this document and my research are that it is inevitably filtered through my subjective experience of my own trauma and conversations I’ve had regarding trauma with others. In order to bridge this subjective gap, I will provide context on the key subjects of this paper with academic research.

I began this research in 2015, the year after I started in my current position as a caseworker. As I’ve gained experience in this field my understanding of the systemic and individual complexities has developed immeasurably. My hope is this research project can highlight some important contexts for understanding the dynamics at play for individuals experiencing homelessness and chronic social marginalization, and that my position working in academia and on the front lines will provide a unique perspective. While poverty and homelessness is a universal problem, my work centres on the social and geopolitical particularities of Montréal, where I am situated. The current structure of institutional support for the homeless in Montréal comes out of religious, particularly Christian,

¹ For example, depictions of “Wanderers” by Albrecht Dürer, which I will discuss later on, presents the still-stereotypical image of an unkempt man in tattered clothes alone in the country.

institutions. Although some of the organisation and funding of resources for the homeless, the poor, and otherwise socially marginalized has been shifted to the state in the last several decades, the institutional framing of the issues is still heavily influenced by the original parochial context.

Synthesising my research into writing has been a difficult and puzzling experience. The academic work I've done is exciting and has helped shed light on and provide context to my practical work with people who experience homelessness and social marginalization. However, even as the ideas have a clarity of form in my mind, when I sat down to write, to begin to consolidate what I have learned, I experienced seemingly insurmountable blocks. What has been particularly striking about this struggle is that it doesn't generally apply to my other creative or academic output—I have been able, with general ease, to work on other writing projects, produce artworks, and even start a mobile community art studio. So, what was it about this thesis that has been so difficult?

Then, last year, I read Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk's seminal book *The Body Keeps the Score*², and things clicked into place. In his book, he describes how trauma affects the brain, both in the moment of the traumatic event and in the remembering of it. Chapter three outlines a study that Dr. Van Der Kolk did with trauma patients, performing brain scans while playing back a recording of the patient's description of their traumatic event. What they found was, when the narrations were played, subjects had increased activity in the amygdala. The amygdala registers potential threats, triggering the fight or flight response and releasing stress hormones, like adrenaline³. That this area of the brain would be particularly activated when reviewing a past traumatic event is not necessarily surprising. What Dr. Van Der Kolk was surprised by was where activity in the brain decreased—the Broca's area, one of the speech centres. "Without a functioning Broca's area, you cannot put your thoughts and feelings into words. Our scans showed that Broca's area went offline whenever a flashback was triggered"⁴. Another unexpected area of activation in the scans was

² Kolk, Bessel van der. 2014. *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*. London: Penguin Books

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

Brodmann's area 19. This area is in the visual cortex and registers images *when they first enter into the brain*. Further, Dr. Van Der Kolk noticed that subjects' brains only lit up on the right side while having a flashback to a traumatic event. The right side of the brain governs the non-verbal, intuitive, and emotional, while the left brain is responsible for the verbal, the analytical and the sequential. In brief, what the studies showed was that during flashbacks to traumatic events, patients experience the event, on a physiological level, as though it is happening in the present. Their bodies are flooded with adrenaline, their heart rate increases, and their decision-making ability is reduced to fight or flight. Further, the suppression of the Broca's area explains why, often, survivors of trauma find it difficult to articulate their experience of the trauma—the area of their brain that would allow them to do so quite literally shuts down. Dr. Van Der Kolk's further research revealed that traumatized people's stress response spikes much more easily than non-traumatized people and takes longer to return to baseline after an event. "The insidious effects of constantly elevated stress hormones include memory and attention problems, irritability, and sleep disorders. They also contribute to many long-term health issues, depending on which body system is most vulnerable in a particular individual"

In further research about trauma, I also learned about compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress disorder (STSD): "a natural but disruptive by-product of working with traumatized clients."⁵ STSD often appears in frontline workers as a result of absorbing the stress and trauma of clients with PTSD and has many of the same symptoms and long-term health effects of PTSD: anxiety, dissociation, attention problems and sleep disturbance.

Becoming aware of how trauma affects the brain was revelatory and explained so many of my experiences. It made total sense that when I tried to write about my experiences working with the homeless on the front lines it felt impossible—reflecting on this material, even in an academic context, was triggering a trauma response, suppressing my ability to form thoughts in language. I was not only triggering the secondary trauma from my job but also my own primary experiences of trauma, homelessness, and traumatic brain injury.

⁵ Sprang, G., Ford, J., Kerig, P., & Bride, B. (2019). Defining secondary traumatic stress and developing targeted assessments and interventions: Lessons learned from research and leading experts. *Traumatology*, 25(2), 72–81. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000180>

When I was ten years old, I was struck by a pickup truck outside of my church. My family and I were unaware of the brain damage this had caused, and how it would adversely affect my life. Then, at the age of thirty-three, I had a tonic-clonic (grand mal) seizure while driving with my partner, causing me to accelerate the car into a hydroelectric pole in Toronto. The accident and the injuries were severe, as is often the case when individuals have serious seizures out of the blue. When I woke up after the accident, I was disoriented and in shock. I remembered only small fractions of being in the car before the accident. Going over the police report later, I was truly unsettled to read of my actions. My fight response had been fully activated, and it took several police officers to subdue me. I was then handcuffed to the gurney. My injuries included a cracked sternum, five broken ribs, a broken clavicle, broken ankle, my tongue cut in two, and skin torn open below my lower lip. My partner, Carmela's, injuries were also very severe and required her to spend months in a rehabilitation clinic learning how to walk again.

Following the accident, I saw a neurologist, Dr. Schneiderman, for several years. During these visits, I came to grips with the brain damage I had sustained as a child, which I had been totally unaware of until that point. During this period I encountered an interview with Oliver Sacks in which he spoke about the effects of left temporal lobe injuries, which sometimes include waking auditory and visual hallucinations.⁶ I was gob smacked. I had experienced auditory and visual hallucinations for several years after my childhood accident, but I had never, in twenty years, spoken about them. They were intense and terrifying, and I was afraid that if I revealed them, I would be perceived as odd, different or mentally ill. In discussing this Sacks interview and my experience of hallucinations with Dr. Schneiderman, he told me that the lesion on my left lobe, there since my original accident, could have easily caused these visions.

The accident when I was 10 years old was seen as a miracle by my church congregation. Everyone who had witnessed the accident recounted a different version of events over the following few years. Some called me the miracle child, others said that the devil

⁶ Oliver, Sacks. "Dr. Oliver Sacks on Coping with Brain Injury and Illness." YouTube. NYU Langone Health, April 4, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDCHKn3I4fl>.

wanted me dead because God had greater plans for my life. The next decade was not easy for many reasons. All of these compounded the effects of my auditory and visual hallucinations. I felt outside of time. In most traumatic brain injuries, there is a loss of time and after both accidents, this occurred. It was only through the stories of others that I was able to construct a narrative of this missing time.

Finally having an answer to all that I had suffered through I felt liberated from the extreme guilt that I had felt for a long time, and at the same moment, enraged by my religious upbringing. I do not despise my religious experiences. They did console me on many occasions when no one else was around to comfort me. The belief that there was a God who loved me unconditionally was lifesaving in some extremely dark moments. However, the individual practitioners caused me and others a lot of harm based on their extreme cult-like views. There was a significant amount of internal rage that individuals directed towards what they considered sin in themselves and others.

This indoctrination of hatred and contempt for the perceived sinner/sin relationship is what I witnessed in myself and others; self-flagellation, in hope of being accepted and worthy of God's love, or worthy of love from anyone. Belief and faith can be an incredible, generative force of creation. We have a remarkable capacity to will and form matter into placeholders for the complex realities of the human experience.

Dr. Van Der Kolk speaks of imagination's role in *The Body Keeps the Score*, which reminded me of this section from Joseph Campbell's *On the Power of the Myth*:

“Heaven and hell are within us, and all the gods are within us. This is the great realization of the Upanishads of India in the 9th century B.C. All the gods, all the heavens, all the world, are within us. They are magnified dreams, and dreams are manifestations in image form of the energies of the body in conflict with each other. That is what myth is. Myth is a manifestation in symbolic images, in metaphorical images, of the energies of the organs of the body in conflict with each other. This organ wants this, that organ wants that. The brain is one of the organs.”⁷

⁷Campbell, Joseph, Bill D Moyers, and Betty S Flowers. 2012. *The Power of Myth*. 46. Turtleback Books.

The Social Position of Suffering

For the past eleven years, I have had jobs in human services as a frontline worker. I am a caseworker, assigned to individuals who are “reintegrating” into society after having been homeless or under-housed. I take on many roles in this position, but primarily the work is accompaniment. I support clients as they navigate all the social structures that one must interact with in order to be seen as a functioning member of society– I help people make doctor’s appointments, file taxes, liaise with clients’ landlords and social workers, talk to their pharmacists, help them get glasses, and file for benefits. Over the years, as I help my clients move through the world and find patches of stability, I learn their stories. In all my time working in this field, this is the most profound training that I’ve had regarding the realities and experiences of homelessness, poverty, and social marginalisation. My research has helped me to put these stories in a broader context.

There are many social, economic and health indicators for people who experience some degree of homelessness. For example, one can look at the cost of housing and lack of well-paying jobs, or marginalisation because of immigration status and racialization. Incidents of traumatic brain injury, mental illness, addiction, and childhood abuse are also higher in the populations that experience some degree of homelessness than in the general population. A 2014 study of the population of people experiencing homelessness in Montreal from the Douglas Research Center of McGill University found that, of 2,148 participants in the study, 22% of participants identified as Aboriginal and 25% identified as another ethnic minority. Around 11% of participants were immigrants (although the study excluded those who did not have legal status in Canada). The study also found that approximately 62% of participants reported emotional abuse, 55% of participants reported physical abuse, and 38% reported sexual abuse in childhood. Around three-quarters of the participants surveyed identified as men and one-quarter as women, with a small percentage of individuals identifying as another gender. LGBTQ2S people were also disproportionately represented in the participant demographics. A 2019 study by the

province of Quebec (as reported by the CBC)⁸ indicated that there were 3,149 experiencing homelessness living in Montréal, although this number only accounts for the “visibly homeless”, i.e. individuals living on the street and in shelters, and does not account for people who have no permanent address. In contrast, there are less than half as many beds available in shelters in the city, fewer than 1,500.

Many Indigenous people who are experiencing homelessness and living in Montréal come from Nunavik, in northern Quebec, or other northern provinces, leaving their hometowns because of a lack of jobs and housing, or to join family living in Montréal. In Nunavik, the total cost of living is 28% higher than in Quebec City⁹, and groceries are on average 58% higher in Nunavik than in Quebec. However, this comparison paints an incomplete picture of the situation since unemployment and lack of jobs are much higher in Nunavik¹⁰. Further, centuries of colonial intervention have completely dismantled Indigenous communities and prevented the maintenance of traditional ways of life. As has recently become very visible, during the 19th and 20th centuries Indigenous children from across Canada were forcibly removed from their families and communities to be raised in residential “schools”. Established federally in the late 19th century, and even earlier by parochial institutions, residential schools were a deliberately genocidal project¹¹. Although the last residential school was officially closed in 1996, the impact on Indigenous communities remains¹². Other governmental institutions have taken over the project of removing Indigenous children from their communities, which can be observed, for example, in the disproportionate rate of representation of Indigenous children in the foster-care system¹³.

⁸Latimer, Eric, and Francois Bordeleau. 2018. “Dénombrement Des Personnes En Situation d’Itinérance Sur l’île de Montréal Le 24 Avril 2018,” March.

⁹ Robitaille, Jean, Enrico Guénard, Sébastien Lévesque, and Gérard Duhaime. 2018. *THE COST of LIVING in NUNAVIK in 2016 RESEARCH REPORT REVISED and EXPANDED VERSION*. Québec: Université Laval, Faculté des sciences sociales. Groupe d’études inuit et circumpolaires.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ For more on the legal frameworks used to dispossess Indigenous peoples and remove children from their communities, etc, see Palmater, Pamela. 2014. “Genocide, Indian Policy, and Legislated Elimination of Indians in Canada.” *Aboriginal Policy Studies* 3 (3). <https://doi.org/10.5663/aps.v3i3.22225>.

¹² For more on residential schools and their effects see Bombay, Amy, Kimberly Matheson, and Hymie Anisman. 2013. “The Intergenerational Effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the Concept of Historical Trauma.” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 51 (3): 320–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461513503380> and

¹³ Trocmé, Nico, Della Knoke, and Cindy Blackstock. 2004. “Pathways to the Overrepresentation of Aboriginal Children in Canada’s Child Welfare System.” *Social Service Review* 78 (4): 577–600. <https://doi.org/10.1086/424545>.

Although the percentage of homelessness among the immigrant population across Canada is roughly proportional to the make-up of the general population,¹⁴ immigrants often face an additional set of risk factors that may contribute to their precarity. Further, the percentage of the population experiencing homelessness who also identify as immigrants is significantly increased in urban areas, for example, government statistics show up to 40% in Toronto, versus 14% in Canada overall¹⁵. In Quebec, per a 2019 report by the province, the top nine countries of origin for all immigrants are Algeria, Morocco, France, Haiti, China, Mexico, Lebanon, the Philippines, and Romania. Of immigrants who come to Quebec as refugees or asylum seekers, around 54% arrive from Haiti and around 25% arrive from Syria¹⁶. Anecdotally, we can extrapolate that many refugees are coming from countries where there is heightened social and political unrest, economic deprivation, or where there have been serious natural disasters, even if the breakdown of countries of origin of refugees changes over time, given the requirements to claim refugee status. Coupled with arriving in a country where they may not speak the language, nor have social connections or legal status, the increased likelihood for immigrants to have experienced many indicators for homelessness is obvious.

While homelessness has existed, across cultures, since time immemorial, the particular character and circumstances of contemporary homelessness in Montréal, and Canadian cities more generally, took shape at the beginning of the 1980s. In the post-war period, Canada, like many other Western democracies, had a period of a robust welfare state, during which social services and social housing were relatively well funded¹⁷. The neoliberal turn saw the dismantling of many social, welfare and housing programs, and the reconfiguration of the role of the State in general, on an ideological and structural level. Due to the increased (and ever increasing) scarcity and cost of housing, these structural

¹⁴ Uppal, Sharanjit. 2022. "Insights on Canadian Society: A Portrait of Canadians Who Have Been Homeless." *Statistics Canada*. Government of Canada. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sharanjit-Uppal/publication/359218489_A_portrait_of_Canadians_who_have_been_homeless/links/622f5e2e8180de5a3df61434/A-portrait-of-Canadians-who-have-been-homeless.pdf.

¹⁵ O'Grady, Bill, Stephen Gaetz, and Kristy Buccieri. 2011. *Can I See Your ID? : The Policy of Youth Homelessness in Toronto*. Toronto, Ont.: Canadian Foundation for Children, Youth and the Law : Justice for Children and Youth.

¹⁶ "DEMANDEURS D'ASILE, RÉFUGIÉS et MIGRANTS À STATUT PRÉCAIRE Un Portrait Montréalais Réalisé Par La Direction Régionale de Santé Publique." 2019. *Santé Montréal*. Province du Québec. https://santemontreal.qc.ca/fileadmin/fichiers/professionnels/DRSP/sujets-a-z/Inegalite_sociale_de_sante_ISS/Rap-Portrait_demandeurs_asile_Mtl.pdf.

¹⁷ O'Grady et al.

changes can be directly linked to both the growth of the population experiencing homelessness in Canada, and to the perception of homelessness as an urban problem¹⁸, which has steadily been criminalised in the last four decades¹⁹. In many provinces activities such as panhandling and squeegeeing (wiping car windows at intersections in exchange for a donation) have been criminalised. In Toronto, for example, the 1999 Safe Streets Act forbids any kind of solicitation of funds or donations within five metres of a bus stop, a phone booth, an intersection, and other places where someone could be considered a captive audience²⁰. Loitering laws also exist in many cities, which criminalise for nothing more than looking like the “wrong type” of person while inhabiting public space. Violations of such laws and ordinances are invariably punished by fines, and the vast majority of such citations are handed out to repeat “offenders”, meaning that individuals living on the street often accrue hundreds, thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of dollars of fines, which they mostly have no way of paying²¹. Stéphane Perrault, a frequenter of the Open Door Shelter in Milton Park (downtown Montréal), told the CBC he estimates he has received at least \$30,000 worth of tickets²². Another Montrealer racked up \$110,000 in fines throughout his time living in a metro station²³. Not only do these fines not help those living on the street, but they are also often an active hindrance to changing one’s circumstances. In some cases, unpaid fines can result in incarceration. Some fines handed out are considered traffic violations and can result in the suspension of a license. This can create significant barriers to employment, not only for jobs that might require one to drive, but also in simply having a valid photo ID. Individuals may be able to work off their fines by volunteering—redirecting any productive energy they might have to find housing or employment towards paying off debt. Even when people are able to get into housing this debt follows them in the form of bailiffs and debt collectors.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Chesnay, Catherine T., Céline Bellot, and Marie-Ève Sylvestre. 2013. “Taming Disorderly People One Ticket at a Time: The Penalization of Homelessness in Ontario and British Columbia.” *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* 55 (2): 161–85. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjccj.2011-e-46>.

²⁰ Chesnay

²¹ Ibid

²² Bellemare, Andrea. 2018. “Stacks of Tickets Are ‘Psychological Weight’ on Marginalized Itinerants, Advocates Say.” CBC. March 2, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/homeless-overticketed-montreal-police-1.4556351>.

²³ Ibid

It is easy, with very little digging, to put together how homelessness is a social issue caused by structural circumstances. Nevertheless, the blame for a person's poverty or lack of housing is often still individualised, seen as a personal failing. This disposition is evident everywhere you look—criminalisation of homelessness and use of public space in general (and, indeed, the dwindling of public space itself!), means-testing of social programs, “self-improvement” requirements often attached to accessing services, and so on. While it is clear that since the beginning of globalisation there has been a cultural shift along with an economic one, I believe that the basis for this attitude towards homelessness and poverty has much deeper cultural roots.

The Ordinance of Labourers of 1349 was the United Kingdom's first anti-vagrancy law and is considered to be the start of English labour law²⁴. Following a two-year period of a bubonic plague pandemic in England, it's estimated that 30-40% of the population died, straining the availability of agricultural workers. In order to curb the natural rise in the cost of labour in a loose labour market, this ordinance required every individual of less than 60 years of age to work, criminalised giving to beggars who were able-bodied and capable of work²⁵, and forbade paying wages that were higher than pre-plague levels. Through the shared legal history of English and Canadian common law, this law, thought to be the first of its kind in Europe, is part of a direct cultural and legal lineage of laws that criminalise poverty and homelessness in Canada today. The management by governments of labour markets also persists as a tool of economic and class maintenance—we can observe today, for example, the cutting of pandemic benefits in Canada and the US in order to turn the screws on historically loose labour markets. Class maintenance, however, is not in itself a good enough reason to compel workers to comply with laws that require them to act against their own interests. The attribution of low moral character and outsider status to people who are poor, homeless, or otherwise indigent, is a necessary tool for the social buy-in of these class hierarchies, a misdirection that is carefully cultivated by the ruling classes to this day.

²⁴ Rothstein, Mark A., and Lance Liebman. 2007. *Employment Law: Cases and Materials*. Sixth. Foundations Press.

²⁵ Putnam, Bertha Haven. 1908. *The Enforcement of the Statutes of Labourers during the First Decade after the Black Death*. New York, NY: Columbia University.

Through my work, I've become interested in the origin and maintenance of these cultural attitudes towards people experiencing homelessness, and human suffering more generally, as important indicators for homelessness and poverty, and why it is allowed to persist in the way that it does. The socio-economic system that allows for degrees of vulnerability that expose people to poverty and homelessness belies its moral orientation. One component of this is positive action—creating the material conditions for suffering to thrive—but another important component is, rather than adjusting these conditions, the accommodation of human suffering through its aestheticization and moralization.

Québec is an overwhelmingly Christian province, with around 88% of the population identifying as Christian, and 83% specifically identifying as Catholic²⁶, a vastly higher percentage of Catholics than in the rest of Canada²⁷. Quebec is dotted with Catholic pilgrimage sites, most of which date back some five hundred years²⁸ to the French colonial period. In Montréal, there are many visible Catholic monuments and Cathedrals, like the massive steel cross perched on the top of Mt. Royal, or St. Joseph's Oratory. More than this, church infrastructure makes a vast network over the city. A substantial number of missions and other parochial and para-church organisations serving the poor and needy are still housed in church properties. At soup kitchens, there are often prayers or homilies given before meals are served, and in many of these organisations religious iconography decorates the halls. Even though the religious population is in steady decline, Christian faith and morality is still ever present in the organisation of services offered to people who are poor and homeless in this city. When I was first hired at Welcome Hall Mission, I was asked why I wanted to work with the community of people experiencing homelessness—essentially, what was my motivation to work with individuals who, in most cases, had been rejected by all of society? I now believe this question to be unanswerable but can see how it might be used to assess someone's motivations and moral beliefs without questioning them about their religious affiliation, in order to comply with non-discrimination in labour

²⁶ Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. "2011 National Household Survey: Data Tables – Religion ." Statistics Canada, January 23, 2019. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011>

²⁷ Savage, Katherine, and Johanne Poirier. "Religions in Canada." Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, October 28, 2021. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2021079-eng.htm>.

²⁸ Rinschede, Gisbert. 1994. "Catholic Pilgrimage Centers in Quebec, Canada." *na*.

standards. The origin of the current cultural makeup of Québec is steeped heavily in Catholic influence. Despite the modern contention of the Québec government's commitment to *laïcité* (secularism), one needs only to look up to the top of Mount Royal, where the 31-metre Mount Royal Cross hovers over the city of Montréal, to understand the ever-present Christian hegemony.

As theologian Leo D. Lefebure outlines in his paper "Understanding of Suffering in the Early Christian Church", early Christian theologians debated the purpose of suffering, to some extent, but the origin of suffering for most was the same: original sin. Varying theological perspectives viewed what constituted original sin differently (some saw impatience as the origin of original sin, others disobedience, while in some considerations it was greed and the accumulation of private property), but the view was that suffering was "ultimately the result of the fallen human condition," and that no "particular individual's sufferings could be attributed to any particular sin; all humans, innocent and guilty, good and bad alike, suffer together."²⁹ Suffering, and in its highest form martyrdom, was viewed as a path to ultimate salvation from God. How this was applied differed in earlier and later Christian contexts, depending on the social, political, historical, and theological specificities of the locale, but in general, this orientation towards suffering persists as an important part of Christian cosmology. In his 1972 book *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ As the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann sought a new approach of dealing with the Christ's suffering and the divinity of God, where the parallel of God is both Human and divine³⁰. Moltmann argues that suffering and love are interconnected in the personage of Christ and it is in this moment that suffering is understood as being part of the divine and not separate. In chapter eight of his book, Moltmann expands on the idea of breaking cyclical suffering brought on by poverty and violence, and that through socialism the effects of these would reduce harm³¹. As theologian Shelly Rambo points to in her article *Spirit and Trauma*, in the latter half of the twentieth century "the question of suffering—divine suffering—was at the forefront of

²⁹ Lefebure, Leo D. 2015. "Understanding of Suffering in the Early Christian Church." *Claritas Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 4 (2).

³⁰ Jürgen Moltmann. 1993. *The Crucified God : The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. 293. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

³¹ *Ibid*

contemporary theology. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann revolutionized Christian interpretations of the crucifixion by claiming that God did not stand outside of the event of the cross but, rather, experienced the suffering. Reformulating the concept of the Trinity and dismantling notions of divine impassibility, Moltmann provided a Christian theological response to the Holocaust. He was representative of many theologians trying to account for the violence and atrocities of the twentieth century. Classic affirmations about God were set alongside the extremities of human experience. Womanist and feminist theologians also countered traditional theologies of the cross, arguing that theologies of the cross have glorified suffering and provided sacred validation for the perpetuation of oppressive systems for persons and communities on the margins.”³² Despite these more contemporary reframings and reconsiderations of suffering in Christian theology, earlier Christian framings of suffering, wherein it is at once a punishment for collective sins and the pinnacle of virtue, still leaks into our structuring ideologies, sometimes producing hyperbolic and fantastical views of those who suffer. What seeps into general cultural consciousness as “Christian doctrine” is not necessarily based on a consistent or disciplined theological approach. Rather, like any other ideological tool, these interpretations of suffering from Christianity are retrofitted to the ideological projects of a given ruling class, and their structuring of society. This, of course, is particular to class based societies in general, and not unique to Christian tradition or cultural milieux. Hebrews 13:2³³ reminds Christians: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” That is, one should show charity and kindness to outsiders not merely because of the inherent value of their humanity, but because they might secretly be divine entities. Christian archetypes of exile and expulsion, conversely, often teach to look at outsiders with suspicion, lest their otherness be a result of their own wicked actions. During the Middle Ages we see an example of this in the myth of the Ahasver, “the Wandering Jew”, who was exiled for taunting Jesus on his way to the crucifixion, now cursed to walk for an eternity until the second coming of Christ. For those who reject the deity of Christ and the gift of his sacrifice, expulsion into the wilderness means endless suffering, trapped in mortal flesh without a place or space that provides comfort, shelter, and safety. In

³² Shelly, Rambo. 2015. “Editorial.” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69 (4): 11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964315593851>.

³³ Hebrews 13:2

Christian theology, the outsider, wanderer, or the antisemitic “wandering Jew”, are lingering archetypes, traceable to Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the story of their sons Cain and Abel.

One could look at the story of Adam and Eve as a dispute between a landlord, God, and His tenants, in which Adam and Eve are exiled for not following rental law. This creation story was passed down through the oral tradition of the Hebrews: the Lord had placed two humans to work and guard the Garden of Eden, essentially custodians who traded labour for rent. Based on the tenancy law established between God and these humans, in Genesis 2:16³⁴, they could eat from the Garden as they pleased, but not from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, because it would bring death. In Eden, there was no shame, and Adam and Eve ran about the garden in the nude. There was no need for protection from climate exposure or disease. Life was ideal. The story continues in chapter four of Genesis when the woman (Eve was not given a name until after she was thrown out of the garden) was beguiled by the serpent with the promise of more. The man also agrees to wanting more, and the fruit is eaten. Hence the first tenancy law was broken, with massive consequences. The man and woman were evicted from the garden of Eden. God, who is also a tailor, fashioned clothes for them made from animals' hides to cover their bodies, of which they learned to be ashamed. Knowledge and shame arrive together, and according to the creation myth it commences from the act of free will and wanting knowledge of good and evil. This is also the beginning of human suffering and labour as a form of repentance. Later, when Cain kills his brother Abel he is marked by God and punished by exile, but not to be hurt or killed. Instead, he is sent out to wander for eternity. This is where the punishment of the wanderer originates, and the Mark of Cain is the stigma he must bear for his sins. The Mark of Cain can be interpreted as the origin and construction of shame as a social emotion, and through careful examination can be applied as an entry point to the topic of the aesthetics of homelessness and the lasting effects of stigmatisation. For example, the interpretation of the Mark of Cain as a darkening of the skin is pervasive and has been used as a theological justification for the exclusion and oppression of racialized people throughout the centuries. While theologians might argue with this interpretation

³⁴ Genesis 2:16

contemporarily, there is no denying the historical impact of its use, for example, as justification for the slave trade.³⁵

While compassion and charity towards the other are emphasised in Christian teaching, suffering as a matter concerning one's immortal soul is also emphasised. This emphasis might sometimes be at odds with a structural and material analysis of how, on this mortal plane, someone came to live in poverty, to be without housing, or otherwise encounter suffering. The moralisation of suffering and marginalisation is by no means exclusive to a Christian worldview and exists outside of explicitly religious contexts or institutions. It is frequently made into a spectacle, which flattens out the nuance and complexity of individual experiences and systemic oppressions. We are often left with representations of suffering that are incredibly black and white—the spectacle of tragedy or the spectacle of success. Take, for example, the popular sculptural work by Timothy Schmalz, *Homeless Jesus* from his *Matthew 25* series³⁶, which depicts a covered, life-size figure sleeping on a bench. Although the figure's face is cloaked, the stigmata on his hands and feet identify him as Jesus. Since 2013, bronzes of this sculpture have been placed all around the world, and one has even been blessed by the pope³⁷. While the underlying message is ultimately one of compassion, it is not without contingency: like the instruction to take in strangers, lest they be angels in disguise, the viewer is asked for compassion because of potential divinity, rather than the recognition of present humanity. The suffering of those experiencing homelessness is glorified in this way, but with an easy out—if a person does not live up to these divine expectations, and rather, more likely, is morally flawed (as are most people), one can withdraw empathy and compassion without guilt. This dynamic emphasises the individualization of responsibility and subtly reinforces that suffering—poverty, homelessness, etc.—results from personal moral failing, and is, therefore, to some extent, deserved.

³⁵ Junior, Nyasha. 2020. "The Mark of Cain and White Violence." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139 (4): 661–73. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbl.2020.0038>.

³⁶ *Homeless Jesus, Matthew 25 Series*. 2013. Bronze.

³⁷ Schmalz, Timothy P. n.d. "Sculptures by TPS | Homeless Jesus." Timothy P. Schmalz. https://www.sculpturebytps.com/portfolio_page/homeless-jesus/.

The feeling of shame is prevalent in communities of homeless people and reinforces suffering. In some cases, people want to punish themselves because they feel a strong sense of regret and failure. In other ways, they feel judged and ashamed for not being able to help themselves. What I have witnessed over the last 7 years has been suffering, sustained by mechanisms of shame and fear.



Fig. 1 Pope Francis examines the 'Jesus the Homeless' sculpture in Vatican City as creator Tim Schmalz looks on in the Vatican.

Those who work on the frontline need to share the Christian ideals of the virtue of suffering, service, and charity, to accept the conditions that are almost invariably present in these jobs. The pay is often very low (for my kind of job in Montréal, for example, the pay range is 18-25CAD/hour), and institutional resources for staff are scant. Because there are inadequate resources for clients, frontline workers often must overextend themselves to find solutions to problems that might otherwise be easily solved. Since so many using these services are in the throes of trauma, addiction or trying to exit other dire circumstances, frontline workers bear the brunt of clients' extreme and abusive behaviour. Love, compassion, and charity are a functional part of Christian doctrine that opens the door for frontline workers to be taken advantage of in these jobs, appealing to their "better nature" rather than adequately equipping or compensating them for their work. This is not a malicious manoeuvre on the part of Christian and other faith-based organisations providing these services. Rather, it is a response to the material conditions of the broader

society, in which so many people “fall through the cracks” into poverty, homelessness, and isolation from essential resources. For an example from recent Canadian politics: in 2022 an informal coalition between the NDP and Liberal parties was made on vague commitments to make housing more affordable and promising to table legislation for constructing new affordable units by 2025³⁸—this is the political response of the “left” parliamentary party responding to a national housing crisis, the national stock of affordable housing ever-dwindling. In Quebec, the average wait-time for a family doctor is three (!) years, and as the pandemic hit the public health system hard across the country, the response of many provincial governments was and is to seek privatisation of whatever areas of the healthcare system they can³⁹, even as healthcare workers, especially nurses, leave the sector altogether. The consequences of inadequate provision by the state for essential services, and funding to NGOs and nonprofits that might fill those gaps, eventually fall on the shoulders of frontline workers, who are necessarily compelled by something more than simply a paycheck.

³⁸ Wherry, Aaron, Rosemary Barton, David Cochrane, and Vassy Kapelos. 2022. “How the Liberals and New Democrats Made a Deal to Preserve the Minority Government.” CBC. March 27, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/liberal-ndp-accord-confidence-supply-agreement-1.6397985>.

³⁹ For example, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney oversaw the privatization of tens of thousands of healthcare sector jobs during the COVID 19 pandemic: Herring, Jason. 2022. “Health-Care Advocates Worry Wave of Privatization Incoming in Budget 2022.” Calgary Herald. February 23, 2022. <https://calgaryherald.com/news/politics/public-health-advocates-worry-wave-of-privatization-incoming-in-budget-2022>.

Introduction to Drawings and Writings

Especially in recent years, there is more and more academic research on the effects of workplace conditions of front-line workers in Canada. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has also been more attention in public discourse to the working conditions of frontline workers in the social and health services sectors, as these public institutions were strained to capacity. Recent studies have focused on the psychological effects of stressful working conditions during the pandemic for frontline workers, often caused by understaffing and overworking.⁴⁰⁴¹ However, as a matter of public policy, this does not seem to translate into an increased investment of resources into social and health services⁴². In my career as a frontline worker, it has become abundantly clear to me that the stories and experiences of those who do this work are essential to understanding the social and cultural dynamics at play in how services are provided, how those living on the margins are viewed in society, and how institutional resources are allocated. It has also been my experience that many of my colleagues feel that they have few opportunities to share their perspectives and knowledge acquired on the job, and be taken seriously. By adding the perspectives of frontline workers to an understanding of homelessness and poverty, we can begin to see how the burdens of institutional gaps end up falling on the shoulders of individual workers, frequently resulting in burnout and secondary trauma in workers. This results in a high turnover in these positions, leading to a discontinuity and loss of institutional memory. Having worked in this field for over 11 years, I live with constant anxiety that I will eventually need to take sick leave to recover from burnout and secondary trauma. Through the reflexive drawings that fill these pages, I seek to grab hold

⁴⁰ Zaheer, S., Ginsburg, L., Wong, H.J. *et al.* Turnover intention of hospital staff in Ontario, Canada: exploring the role of frontline supervisors, teamwork, and mindful organizing. *Hum Resour Health* **17**, 66 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-019-0404-2>

⁴¹ Sritharan, Jeavana, Thivia Jegathesan, Dharshie Vimalaswaran, and Ashvinie Sritharan. "Mental health concerns of frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: A scoping review." *Global Journal of Health Science* **12**, no. 11 (2020): 89-105.

⁴² For example, health and social services spending as a percentage of the GDP are currently near the level of that they were in the 1980s, a significant decline from the early 2000s: Bartlett, Randall, Dominique Lapointe. "Health Care Costs in Quebec." n.d. Accessed January 29, 2023. <https://www.ifsd.ca/web/default/files/Presentations/Reports/Quebec%20EN%2017009.pdf>.

of a temporal pole that will help me find my way back to some form of happiness. Working on the frontlines inevitably triggers one's own personal trauma. Drawing has been a medicine for my mind. It shapes the void of space and time that often engulfs me after work, giving form to chaos and structuring the material of the mind. Like Cicero, I seek to doctor myself, moulding the plasticity of an idea until it finds a new path on the page⁴³. Each neuron is an ink mark, akin to water travelling over arid ground. I think of this practice like the stoic philosophy of eradicating certain emotions from the body that would otherwise warp my decision-making. Or perhaps less like the stoic's philosophy, and more like Husserl's "epoché",⁴⁴ wherein I can bracket my painful emotions so that the experience can be analysed and re-shaped from a distance. I believe, as gestalt thinkers do, that this would literally reshape the mind to enjoy the discomfort of creation; a feeling of openness that does not know when it begins or ends. The structure of imagination is at the same time reductive and additive, a paradox of ink fills the negative space of the page, forming a narrative, each line a question. In a conversation between monads, as creators we become aware of the possibility and the infinite expressions of the universe. Creation forms the matter of the brain as the material is shaped in your hands.

Fig. 2 Bruegel the Elder



⁴³ Nussbaum, Martha Craven . 1996. *The Therapy of Desire : Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton, N.J. ; Chichester, U.K.: Princeton University Press.

⁴⁴ Cogan, John. n.d. "Phenomenological Reduction, the | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/phen-red/>.

Philosophy and plastic arts are the doctors' tools, shaping the void, eradicating self-pity, and creating a new path of exploration.

My artwork is research into an area of crucial social and spiritual concern that is currently overlooked. I seek to clarify and engage through art in places I cannot reach with language. Though I do experience therapeutic relief through this practice of drawing, for the purposes of my research I don't see this practice as a form of art therapy. While the once-popular "right brain/left brain" binary, which proposed that the left hemisphere of the brain is the site of analytical function, and the right creative functions, has now been debunked by neuroscientists, trauma research, by the likes of Dr. Van der Kolk, does support the idea that creative exercises like drawing can be helpful in accessing ideas and information that are hard to articulate in language. As a person with neurological impairments, this is how I approach drawing as a research tool. Growing up in an intensely religious community, I was aware, to an extent, of my indoctrination into the world view of the church—but simply knowing this wasn't enough to extricate me from it. "Neurons that fire together, wire together", as psychoneurologist Donald Hebb's famous axiom goes—that is, our repeated experiences form cognitive biases, embossed neural pathways that one cannot simply think one's way out of. I was initially drawn to the study of philosophy as a means to investigate the formation of my own religious indoctrination, and the cognitive issues that I discovered were the result of my brain injury. I was looking for a structure through which to see the world that would allow me to understand it rationally and methodically. I've discovered that what philosophy, as well as art, offers that can help rupture indoctrination is doubt. The rigorous practice of seeking clarity necessitates letting go of certainty and becoming comfortable with open endedness so that one might gently hold a thought or experience without overpowering it. Doubt is a way to bring you into the here and now, to experience the world as it truly is. The following series of drawings are the result of a habitual practice to process my experiences at work. Through them, I realised I could push further towards a clarity in the understanding of my research into this field.

Throughout my work and research into the realities of homelessness, I became preoccupied with looking for representations of homelessness and poverty that diverge

from the stereotypical imagination of such subjects. More often than not, these subjects are depicted as unkempt men and women in tattered clothing, alone in a scene, wandering or sleeping in public places. Take, for example, the “Homeless Jesus” sculptures I mentioned in the previous section, or Albrecht Durer’s depictions of “wanderers”. While there is truth to this stereotyping, it reflects a narrow portrait of the reality of poverty and homelessness—notably, the depiction of isolation and otherness by placing figures alone does, in some ways, accurately reflect the social isolation that impoverished people often experience, the reality is that most people, even those experiencing homelessness and poverty, exist in communities and networks, but the social dimensions of their lives are often ignored in art. When I was searching for early representations of poverty, homelessness and working people more broadly, I was struck by the rich scenes I found when I revisited the works of Breugel the Elder. Pieter Bruegel, the Elder, also sometimes referred to as “Peasant Bruegel”, was one of the most influential figures of Dutch and Flemish Renaissance painters, and among the first generation of painters to eschew religious subjects in favour of depicting the lives of ordinary people. He is renowned for his densely populated paintings of peasant life in the 1500s providing the viewer with a contained topographic view into the overlapping narratives present in the-day-to-day workings of that society.

Another artist whose depictions of homelessness and poverty I connect with is Mina Loy. Loy was an exceptional creative force who received posthumous recognition for her poetry and took part in several art movements throughout her career before settling in the Bowery in a boarding house. Often referred to as a bohemian, I feel that this portrayal is simplistic as it blankets and romanticises the struggles that Loy endured as a Jewish woman in British society, which Carolyn Burke adeptly details in her incredible biography *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*⁴⁵. I am most influenced by the work she made while living in a shared dwelling on Stanton street in the Bowery of New York. Here we see the struggle and depth of Loy’s struggle to understand her limitations as an ageing female artist surrounded by the despair and suffering of those experiencing what she

⁴⁵ Burke, Carolyn. 2021. *Becoming Modern : The Life of Mina Loy*. New York: Picador / Farrar, Straus And Giroux.

called “the compensations of poverty”⁴⁶. Her assembling of material from her neighbours into works such as *Communal Cot* represents a deep understanding of how people are excluded from the social exchange. As Loy herself became more isolated during this period and felt the closing of possible choices, her work exploded with empathy for her neighbours in Skid Row. The works she made from bits of cloth and garbage sourced from the inhabitants and streets of the Bowery present a deeply intimate and psychologically charged depiction of the reality of poverty within the structure of capitalism in post-WWII New York City.

I have been deeply influenced by Bruegel and Loy because you can feel the struggle in their work as they wrestle with the complex state of their natures while synthesising the narratives of suffering in their lives and those they feel for. I see my “Rusty Nail” series of drawings as part of a lineage, in which Bruegel the Elder and Mina Loy are also a part, of reflections of poverty and homelessness that centre on the social and community aspects of these experiences.



Fig. 3 Bucket of rusty nails found in my father's workshop

⁴⁶ Loy, Mina. 2015. *The Lost Lunar Baedeker : Poems of Mina Loy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

The Rusty Nail Series: Drawings & Writings

At 64 my father took a bricklaying job on St. Viateur street in Montréal. He was just a few months away from taking his retirement. The job was terribly difficult, and he'd taken it hoping to have some extra money for his retirement. It was 32 C on a weekday, and someone had asked him to move his truck. While doing so, he had a heart attack and rolled into a hydro pole. He died the next day in hospital when we took him off life support, after being unresponsive since the accident. After his death, my brothers and I began to remove all of the construction materials that were left over from the multitude of renovations that he had done. Among them was a rusty bucket of nails and steel wire.

The "Rusty Nail" series is composed of drawings and sculptural works that emerge from a complex set of overlapping narratives. It is the way that I use art to gain some control over the chaos of emotion that I feel daily. In the construction of meaning through material, I can bring what I think is discarded and overlooked to the forefront. A worthless bucket of rusty nails that may find new life and hope.

Everyone has a different way they recall information. For example, some remember the conversation, others remember a feeling that they had and then the layers of that experience begin to pile on one another until a situation or experience can be retold. My mind reconstructs the space where the event took place, then the individuals that were present appear. There are moments when it feels as if I am outside of my body looking down. It's in these moments that the creative aspects of my mind take precedence and imagery floods in. These images take the form of memory—the term that I think is most accurate to describe myself within this experience is "spatial thinker". This constructed memory allows me to remember the objects and spaces that appeared during the event. These drawings are outside of time, in the sense that they are an amalgamation of experiences, triggered by my work and research in the field of poverty. Each one is an attempt to bring clarity to my work and research that can't be reached through other means.

I grew up in a traumatic environment. Violence, anger, suffering, and depression were ever-present, and poverty was the catalyst that caused the exothermic shock to remain for many years. The bucket of rusty nails is a coagulation of memories from growing up in the trades and dealing with “the compensations of poverty”. Trauma, in my mind, has a texture and a smell, it reveals itself in between the air of two minds trying to find a respite. This is what I have come to refer to as empathy.

Having presented the broad social, historical, and political contexts for my research, the following is a series of my drawings and creative writings (along with a few from artists whose work is highly relevant to my own) that frame my research in an auto-ethnographic manner. As my research is, in part, practice based, my observations and experiences often have a highly personal quality, and it was important to me that this was reflected in this thesis work. The component of autoethnography research that is most pertinent to this document is how it connects my experience to social meaning and a new way of understanding, a deep knowledge that demands introspection. Autoethnography as a discipline that arose out of ethnographic practices through the struggle of researchers to account for the inevitable influence of subjectivity—the researcher’s and that of the subject—and the possibility of observing human subjects as a true outsider, without influencing or being influenced.⁴⁷ While this concern emerged early in the history of ethnography as a discipline, the term and idea of *autoethnography* first emerged in the 1970s as way to fully account for the researcher as the primary storyteller in the relaying of their ethnographic research.⁴⁸ As Walter Goldschmidt wrote in *Anthropology and the Coming Crisis: An Autoethnographic Appraisal* “In a sense, all ethnography is self-ethnography.”⁴⁹ This form of research lends itself to an arts based approach because the arts fill the void where words fail. It is in this space that those that are seldom heard or hard to reach can find their voice and be heard. This aspect of qualitative data collection focuses on the subjective nature of the human experience, and it is through creative based art that trauma can find a medium of expression. In Ian Stirlings thesis *Deep Silence: A*

⁴⁷ Poulos, Christopher N. 2021. *Essentials of Autoethnography*. Washington, Dc: American Psychological Association.

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Goldschmidt, Walter. “Anthropology and the Coming Crisis: An Autoethnographic Appraisal.” *American Anthropologist* 79, no. 2 (1977): 294. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/673841>.

Spiritual Auto Ethnography he speaks of deep silences as the places where the arts exist, and it is here I found a way of expressing the experiences of my years of reflection:

“Autoethnography starts in life, makes sense of lives in life, and transforms life. It begins with the here and now, with epiphanies: ‘remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life’ (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). As such, they often capture moments of vulnerability and intensity, such as deep silences.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Stirling, Ian Robert. “Deep silences: a spiritual autoethnography: reclaiming inner space and silence as a locus of the sacred.” DPT thesis, University of Glasgow. (2018)

While working at the refuge I encountered many men who were subject to the gig economy. Over the last decades, the decrease of full-time employment in every field left many having to take on cash work and other precarious jobs which don't offer any kind of compensation for injury or other worker protection. There are employment agencies that some individuals were able to work with to find slightly less precarious work, contracting people out as day labourers in warehouses and other jobs that often require heavy lifting. However, since it was known that these companies hired men from the mission, they were often the target of sabotage by full-time employees who feared losing their jobs to the temp workers. Stigma follows those experiencing homelessness everywhere they go, even in the jobs they take to improve their situations.

The biblical idea of the vice of sloth reaches into the contemporary stigma of people who are struggling in poverty, who are characterised as lazy, men with idle hands. The reality, however, is that over the past 40 years international trade agreements, like NAFTA, have obliterated many blue-collar careers, leaving generations of workers without work. In the service industry, small businesses have been replaced by big chains, where corporations hire teenagers who can be paid less than mature staff. Other jobs have been completely automated, moved offshore, or otherwise eliminated. All of this has driven wages down and left a generation of workers without adequate work. Careers that used to provide adequate pensions have been converted to contract work with no benefits. Wealth and income inequality have been steadily rising since neoliberalisation, and as each new generation comes of age, they are less likely to earn more, or even as much, as their parents. The myth of the middle class becomes more and more evident, as only the few with inherited wealth are able to retire comfortably, in stark contrast to the many who will never be able to retire and stop working only when they are no longer capable, "retiring" onto meagre government pensions. Now we watch the obliteration of the middle class. As we advance we see primarily a two-class system: the children of inherited wealth who can retire comfortably and the impoverished elderly, unable to work.

The age of retirement is set by the federal government at 65. Some fields allow those retiring at this age to have many healthy years left. My uncles and aunts who worked in the

garment industry lived well after their retirement. Those who worked in the trades were hobbled and suffered greatly with bodily pain. Even as pensions have not been adequately indexed to the cost of living in recent decades, the dramatic spike in inflation and corollary cost of living increases has made small government pensions cover even less. Meanwhile, the richest families in Canada have seen their wealth grow astronomically during the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis.



Fig. 4 "Idle Man" - Man dressed in worn coat lying down on pier on New York City docks during Great Depression, Lewis W. Hine (1935)

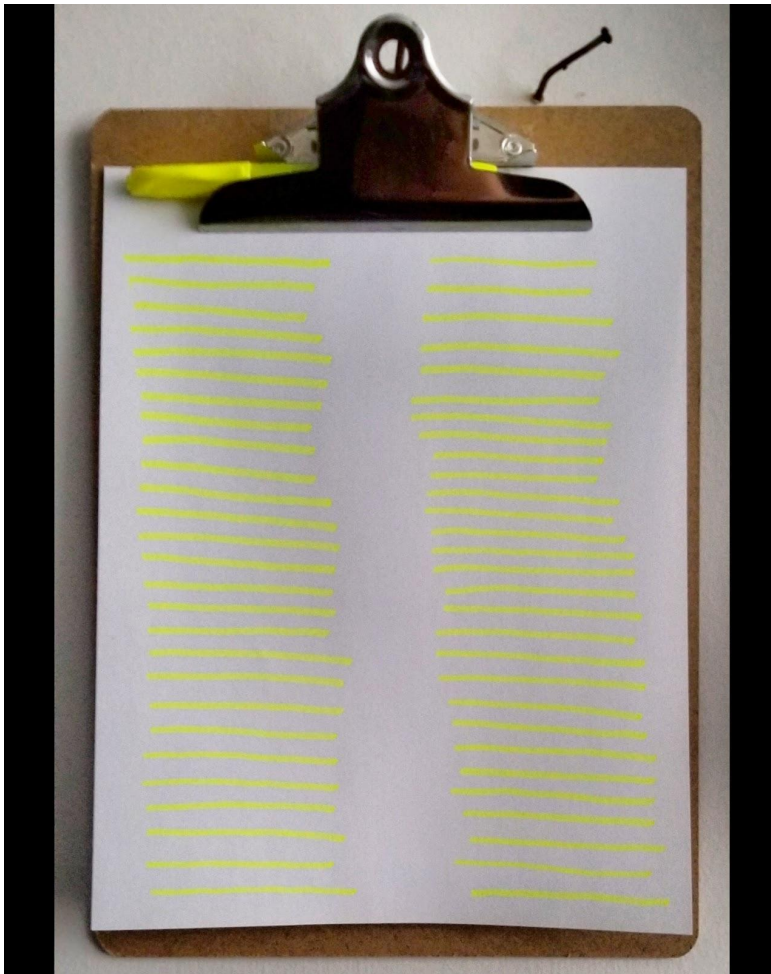


Fig. 5 "Clipboard" - 8 - 1/2 / 11 paper - highlighter - Rusty Nail Series

February 4th

During the summer of 2015, when I first started working at a men's shelter I was given a clipboard with 130 names of clients who used the services. Since then that number has grown exponentially. A few months before starting this job I had lost my mother to ovarian cancer after a 4-year battle, so emotionally I felt quite raw. I stood by the door and, one by one, each of these men who had lined up single file looked at me and gave me their name. I found it on the sheet, highlighted it and confirmed the mattress they preferred, be it on the floor, the bottom of the bunk bed, or the top. To this day I cannot describe this event without crying.

My role in this system was to provide psycho-social support as a caseworker within the Projet Logement Montréal (PLM), based on the housing first initiative. The governing

principle of the project is to help people experiencing homelessness have their basic needs met—shelter, and food—and then to address underlying issues, like illness, addiction or trauma, once they aren't in survival mode. Initially, we followed 15 participants from the refuge through the process of reintegration into housing and society at large.

For an office, I was given a closet space with a desk connected to the main dining area in the mission. I had no formal intake paperwork at that point, so I used some photocopy paper to take down the information of people seeking housing. At first, no one approached me. I was unknown, and the unknown increases fear in those that are in survival mode. Then slowly, on the first night, I was approached and I started to take down basic information from clients regarding the requirements for this program. We worked with two definitions of homelessness—episodic homelessness, defined as having no fixed address for at least six months; and chronic homelessness, years of intermittent or consecutive living on the street. When I would ask clients how long they had been experiencing homelessness, without fail, each would insist that they were not. This surprised me at first until I began to realise that each person had a particular stigmatised image attached to what they considered to be “homeless”. The image of the homeless person as a wanderer— an outsider with long, unkempt hair, torn and soiled clothes—was deeply imprinted into the collective conscience, preventing these men from seeing the reality of their situations.

After choosing ten individuals to work with, I would arrange with each client to meet a housing agent from our project. The housing agent and I would ask the client which part of the city they would like to live in, and the agent would then look for an apartment that fit the subsidy we provided, based on 20% of the rent, or 25% if electricity was included. At this point, our project was not well known around the city, and we had the housing agent answer any questions that the landlords would have, and convey any questions the client had regarding the building or apartment. We were careful not to let the landlords know that the potential tenant was currently without any permanent housing. In some cases, a client would reject an apartment. Sometimes the reasons were obvious and apparent, and sometimes the logic of their decision was obscured and seemingly irrational. For the most

part, however, they would accept an apartment and sign a lease, and PLM would then process their social aid check through the program's fiduciary.

Once the lease was signed, I would help my client prepare for move-in. This usually began with a shopping trip with a very small budget, since most people I worked with had absolutely nothing. I would walk through the aisles of Walmart or dollar stores, where suddenly my clients were faced with a cascade of decisions, choices that a housed person makes without thinking but are utterly absent from a life on the street. Buying a shower curtain, choosing the colour of towels or dishes, rooting out all the mundane necessities: toilet plunger, dish soap, brooms. For many this process was overwhelming, suddenly there were so many decisions to be made. Even grocery shopping could be a challenge since most had relied on shelter meals or whatever could be scrounged up on a given day—meal planning was simply not a developed skill. Once back in the apartment I would wait with the client for donated furniture and the kit-de-départ to arrive, helping set things up and make basic plans for what would happen the next day and the day after that. And then I would leave, and for the first time in sometimes years or decades, the person would be alone, alone in their own home.

Adjusting to this new life wasn't always easy. For some, the relative quiet was disconcerting, compared to the constant din of the city or the breathing of dozens of people sleeping in a single room in a shelter. Often after a few months of living alone, an individual might start having bodily pain that they had never noticed before—the constant adrenaline of surviving on the street masked toothaches, bad backs, arthritis, and sometimes much more serious illness. My work was not finished once someone stepped over the threshold of an apartment, in some ways that is where it began, helping people re-learn how to have a home.



Fig 6. "Medium of Exchange" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

Shadowed intertwined lingering layers of regret—how does one forgive themselves? Barely able to hear the mumbled words branding himself a coward. He is unable to take his own life so steadily he drowns himself, an ounce at a time. He withers in the dim light of his flat with just the flicker of the telly, as he downs another shot of rubbing alcohol. Disinfecting transgressions numbs the pain.

I'm not sure how hope comes to be. When someone is in complete despair, I tell them that the world is a better place because they are a part of it. I mean it, I feel it, but I don't know why exactly. Is this hope? Are they the words I wished someone said to me? Today my eyes are filled with tears. I'm not sure if my client will be ok through the night. It's moments like these that I still wish that I believed in prayer.

When you encounter someone else's suffering, through empathy, you begin to experience it as if it were your own. This creates a vested interest in ending that person's suffering, however, it's essential that, in this complex exchange, you remain aware of what you want and what the other person wants so that you don't push the person to resolve something that they're not ready to resolve. One of the hardest things to do in these scenarios, when you want to help and you want to make things better, is nothing. It's not your pain and suffering, it's theirs. As an intervention worker, my goal is to accompany clients through their processes, no matter how long that takes, be it months or years.

Working in social services means having many hard conversations, and you have to wait until people are ready to have those conversations, leaving the door open for them but not rushing them through. Sometimes people want to have those conversations on days when you're not up for it. Then you must make the hard decision about whether you push through your own limitations and exhaustion, or tell them you can't, risking their trust and progress. It's always a difficult call—maybe this person has never had anyone they've trusted before, maybe it's the first time they've tried to talk about these things. In these instances, the choice is to sacrifice your own mental health or theirs.

In most jobs, you don't wake up in the morning planning to go to work and express extreme vulnerability, but that's what intervention workers do. It requires an enormous amount of compassion and empathy to do this work, and often this limits the stores of compassion and empathy you have for your own loved ones. This is the hardest thing about being a frontline worker, for me, because often by the time I reach home I have nothing left to give



Fig. 7 - "#masculinityinlatecapitalism" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

Compassion and empathy die when we choose who is deserving and who is not. Generations of men, now redundant as automation overshadows their outdated skills. If they were put out to pasture that would be a kindness, but the harsh reality that awaits them is the endless shame that only poverty can provide. They shuffle through the streets, more days behind them than in front. Now of no use to society, they depend on charity. The patriarchy beats what little life they have left as they are ticketed for loitering by that thin blue moral line. Fined for their anguish and told to move along.



Fig. 8 - "Communal Cot" - Mina Loy - mixed media - 1949

Mina Loy would buy small bits of fabric and other odds and ends from the people at the local missions on the Bowery to use in her artworks⁵¹. These people, the bums of Skid Row, were her neighbours and made up her community. This is what is so moving to me about *Communal Cot* and similar works of hers, the care towards the materials and the subjects in its construction, material, and subject merging around the edges to become one thing, a deeply empathetic image of a reality rarely represented in art.

Loy would often leave her home looking quite dishevelled, sometimes in just her nightgown for example. She was quite isolated and didn't want to engage with her artist peers, frequently turning down invitations to salons or exhibitions. It is evident through her poetry and artwork that she shared a sense of loss and suffering with the people of the Bowery. *Communal Cot* doesn't come across as someone doing a short body of work on a topic, her embeddedness in this community comes through in the work (she was referred to as the duchess — when you help someone who has a lower class than you, you do feel better about the problems and issues you have in your own life, especially if you isolate yourself).

⁵¹ Burke, 421

As an intervention worker, you have to interrogate the power differential and the reasons why you are doing this type of work, however exhausting. This interrogation is necessary because it's quite easy to slip into "hero mode"—saviour complex—which can have many negative outcomes. It requires an overwhelming amount of introspection. In my experience, introspection and empathy go hand in hand, both move you away from a search for certainty, making space for doubt.

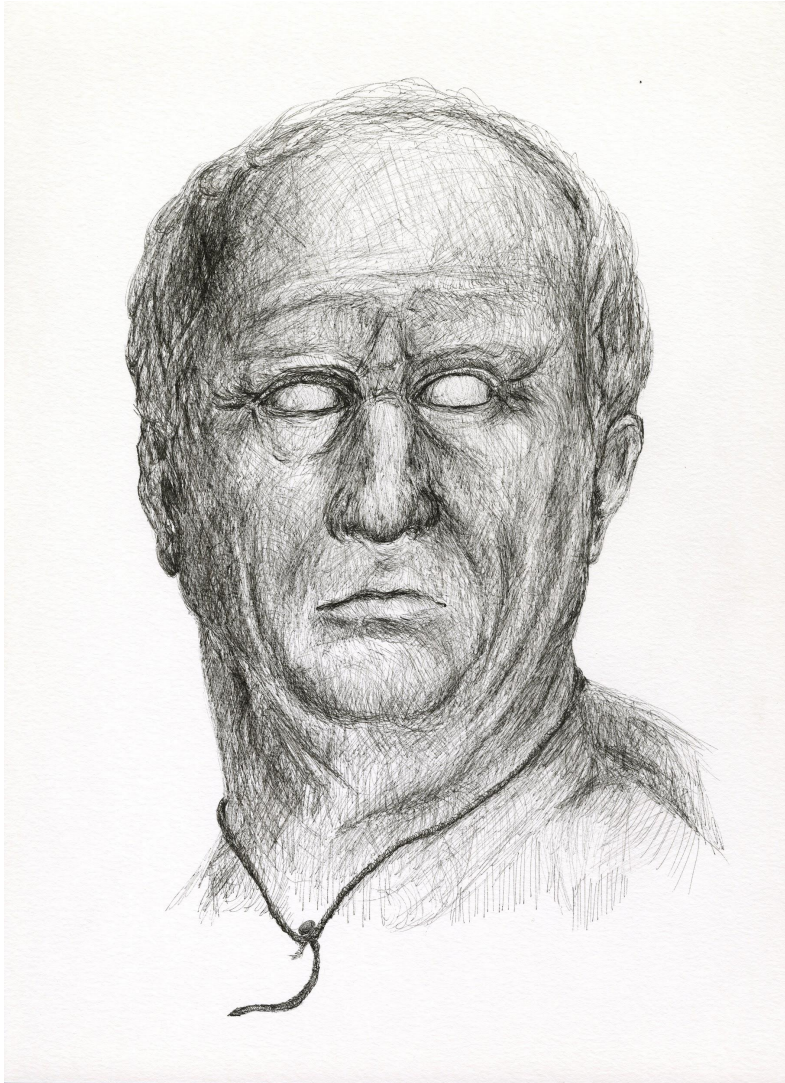


Fig. 9 Marcus Tullius Cicero - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

"There is, I assure you, a medical art for the soul. It is philosophy, whose aid need not be sought, as in bodily diseases, from outside ourselves. We must endeavor with all our resources and all our strength to become capable of doctoring ourselves." — Cicero⁵²

During a given day there are often moments when I think back on conversations I had while studying Cicero's writings on emotions. In particular, books 3 and 4 of *The Tusculan*

⁵² Cicero, Marcus Tullius, and Margaret Graver. 2002. *Cicero on the Emotions : Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Disputations, I recall, a theory presented about shoring oneself up in preparation for the coming pain or waves of grief⁵³. This I found remarkable as a structure that has helped me in periods of my life when it was necessary to disconnect my emotions from an event. However, I think the real work was not in limiting the effects of emotion, but rather in being able to study how both ways of reacting to events came to be. Understanding how I interpreted an event and then its emotional impact allowed me the ability to form a more harmonious exchange and appropriate emotional response that did not harm myself or others.

⁵³ Ibid, 73

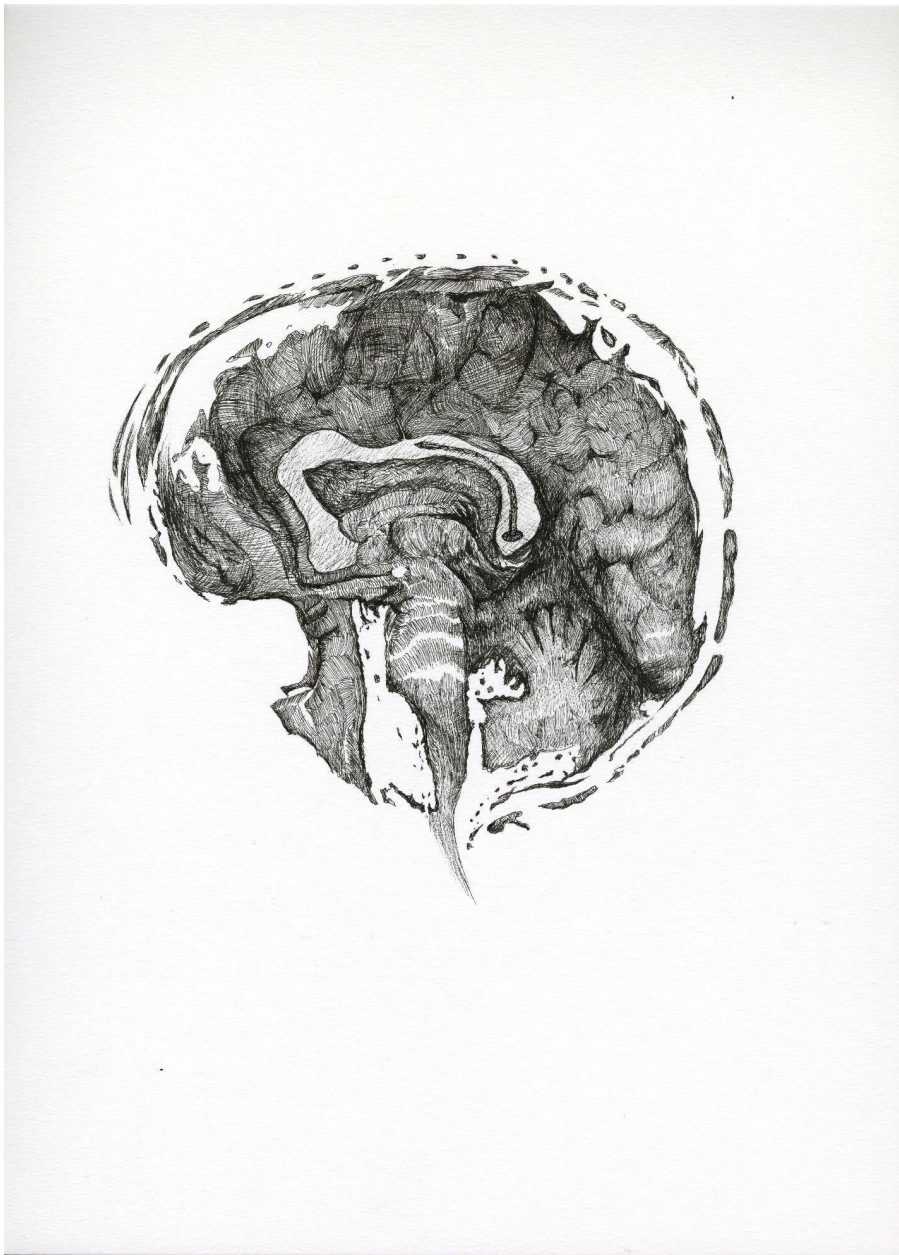


Fig. 10 - MRI 2007- ink drawing - 11"/15" - brain damage - Rusty Nail series

This is what the public saw, his legs covered in sores, the smell of urine and crap surrounded him like a protective wall. But there was a little cyst lying deep within his brain that twisted his memory as it filled with blood. This "difficult man" did not need to reflect on his past vice or his failings as a father, a brother, a man—what he needed was an MRI.

Today I can barely write this sentence. I have placed earbuds to block sound. I am waiting outside a Service Canada centre to accompany a 65-year-old man to fill out his documents for his pension. I'm trying to filter the cacophony of the street. I am overwhelmed.

Between the previous entry and now someone is hiding in a laundromat. Two hours of trying to orchestrate a safe way for him to lay his head down and rest. It's been 36 hours and all he has eaten is a banana. In navigating the lives of others, I work through a series of thought experiments that place me in a time and space I've never before occupied. I contextualise this space and imagine the person navigating the sensory data of that area while experiencing psychosis. Other people at a food court are taking a break from shopping while the itinerant feels constantly observed but ignored at the same moment, under surveillance for being alone. His isolation gives him a cloak of invisibility where he does not feel judged, at least not for being homeless.



Fig. 11 - "Highly Magnified Rat Flea (everyone needs to feel useful)" - ink drawing 11"/15" - rusty nail series

In the process of dealing with finding adequate housing, one of the issues has constantly been infestations of bed bugs, cockroaches, and rats either prior to the individual moving in or during their stay. The more issues there are with the building (be they aesthetics, location, or safety) the lower the rent will be, which in turn allows it to meet the government budget for subsidised housing. Certain "slumlords" will work with government housing projects in order to play the system of public/private temporary housing. Since my organisation represents a governmental body, we can sometimes apply pressure on the landlords to undertake proper extermination or necessary repairs, but most of the time they won't, preferring often to leave the program instead.

What purpose does a person have if all they carry is the weight of their shame? A parasitical state of mind dependent on the structure that judges his merit. Passing people pity the parasite. Good citizens judge, recoil, spit—the basest form of human exchange. Yet, the rat

flea is grateful to be seen; their pity becomes a distorted form of love. The pity imprisons, imposes and twists his narrative until ground-up self-pity is all that remains.

Everyone has a prejudice as to what constitutes proper housing. What I found shocking is that sometimes the clients are fine with infestations. I wondered if they didn't believe they deserved better or if they should just be happy with what they've been given. There was always a fear that they would be blamed for the infestation as they had just moved in—they didn't know if they had brought it in with them. They already felt like the infestation in the building, coming from an outside state of nature.



Fig. 12 - "Tea Bag" - ink drawing- 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

July 28th

My chest hurts with worry. I may be evicted as my landlord decides to sell the place I've been renting for 7 years. The return on his investment will be sizeable. The return on mine is not. The irony of working so hard to house individuals for the last 7 years and now facing the distinct possibility of being priced out of the rental market is overwhelming. How can I possibly express hope to my clients when I have this bitter taste of mingled ash sitting on the tip of my tongue?

Often in this thesis, I have referred to secondhand trauma or, as it's also referred to, compassion fatigue. What stability can I offer others when my fists must remain so tight just to make it through the day?

My birthday is tomorrow—a dark comedy of feeling disjointed and displaced, I encourage myself to keep smiling so I can make it through the week as I wonder: *what will happen next?*



Fig. 13 - The Sacred and the Profane - ink drawing- 12"/18" - Rusty Nail series

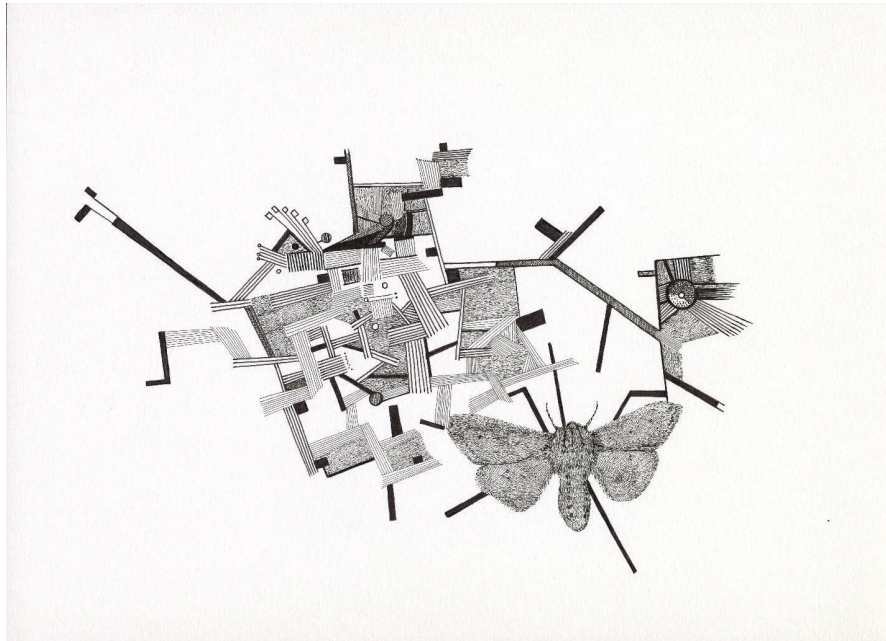


Fig 14. - Woolly bear moth - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

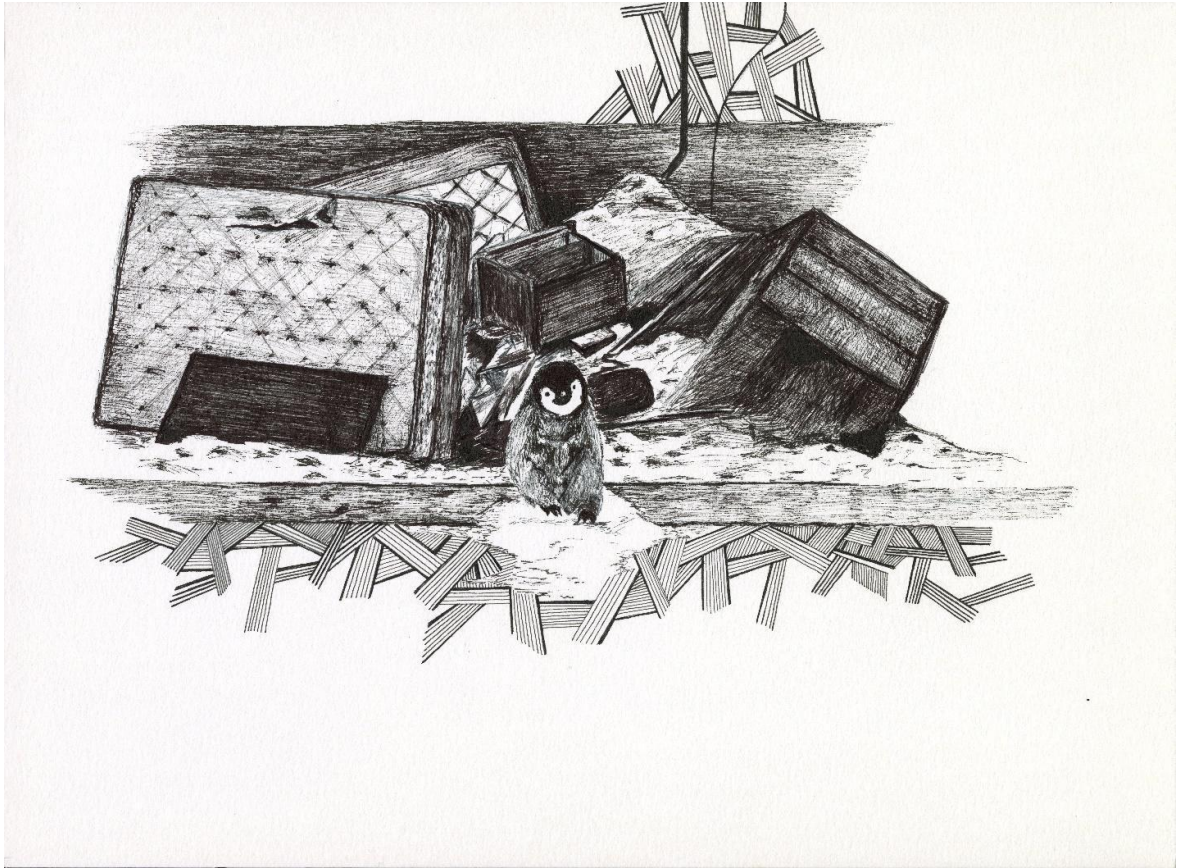


Fig. 15 - "66-year-old man evicted (Instagram video of baby penguin)" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

It's Wednesday. A 66-year-old man is evicted into the cold morning air. It is now sixteen degrees below zero, and all that awaits him is a cot at the shelter. I witness the law being upheld as the remnants of his life, ejected from the apartment building, fill the snow-covered ground. Powerless, I distract myself from the pain of the scene by watching a baby penguin stumbling and walking for the first time through the snow in a viral video. The rental board does not consider where this man will find shelter; justice is blind.



Fig. 16 - "A cup of tea in the Ghetto" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rust Nail series

Sound is one of the biggest issues regarding problems in apartments. What you're able to hear affects your quality of life. Even the most patient individual would want their neighbour evicted if they hear the man screaming at the voices in his head till 4 am, thinking that there is a residence or hospital that will care for him. But the reality is that he would be on the street being laughed at by children as they speak amongst themselves on the sidewalks.

The din of the room

The din of the street

The din of my neighbour

The din of the bus

The din of the metro

The din of rush hour

The din of construction

The din of factories

The din of laughter

The din of friendship

The din of silence

The din of death

The din of disembodied voices

The din of the wilderness

The din of the city

The din of the rat scratching vinyl

The din of the gramophone

Under capitalism silence and sound are commodified. Whether it be the building of great theatres to shape the sound of orchestras for those allowed to listen, or the soundproofing and construction of homes that protect against the din of the city; quiet is accessible only to those with the funds to buy it. The use of the gramophone became popular in the factories of industrialization, the music was played to overlay and conceal the booming machinery. The music played on, masking the noise of the machines, as production workers slowly went deaf, unaware.

It is understood by health practitioners that individuals caught in the cycle of homelessness are in a constant state of survival—fight, flight or freeze. Their senses are entirely overwhelmed by their survival instinct. A recurring issue for individuals experiencing episodic or chronic homelessness is acclimating to sound and ambient noise when settling into a new living space. The initial three months are a period of decompression, their senses disengaging from the stimulus and constant noise of institutional life and the city. During this time, most of my clients convey that they have difficulty sleeping and a sudden awareness of pain never previously felt. The most reported complaint is the profound feeling of isolation in the midst of silence. Although the shelter and the city streets contribute an onslaught of sensory information, they nevertheless remain communal spaces of suffering, shared among the population of those experiencing homelessness. Clients have told me that the quiet permeating their new apartment was shocking: the newness of hearing themselves being all too foreign. Fear of loud, abrupt noises figured prominently in their list of concerns. The abrupt disruption of a dropped pan from a

neighbouring apartment could provoke a fight, flight, or freeze response (this is the case for clients who spent previous time in institutional custody, such as prison, in which a loud, abrupt noise could be a precursor to danger). Other health-related issues would frequently manifest themselves, such as auditory hallucinations, traumatic ear injury, or tinnitus—common problems among those experiencing homelessness, as few have the awareness or stability to address these health concerns. More debilitating still is the reluctance, especially among male residents, to admit vulnerability for fear of being further marginalised. Instead, "sucking up" one's pain appears to be the better, more appropriate response in the face of pain or trauma.

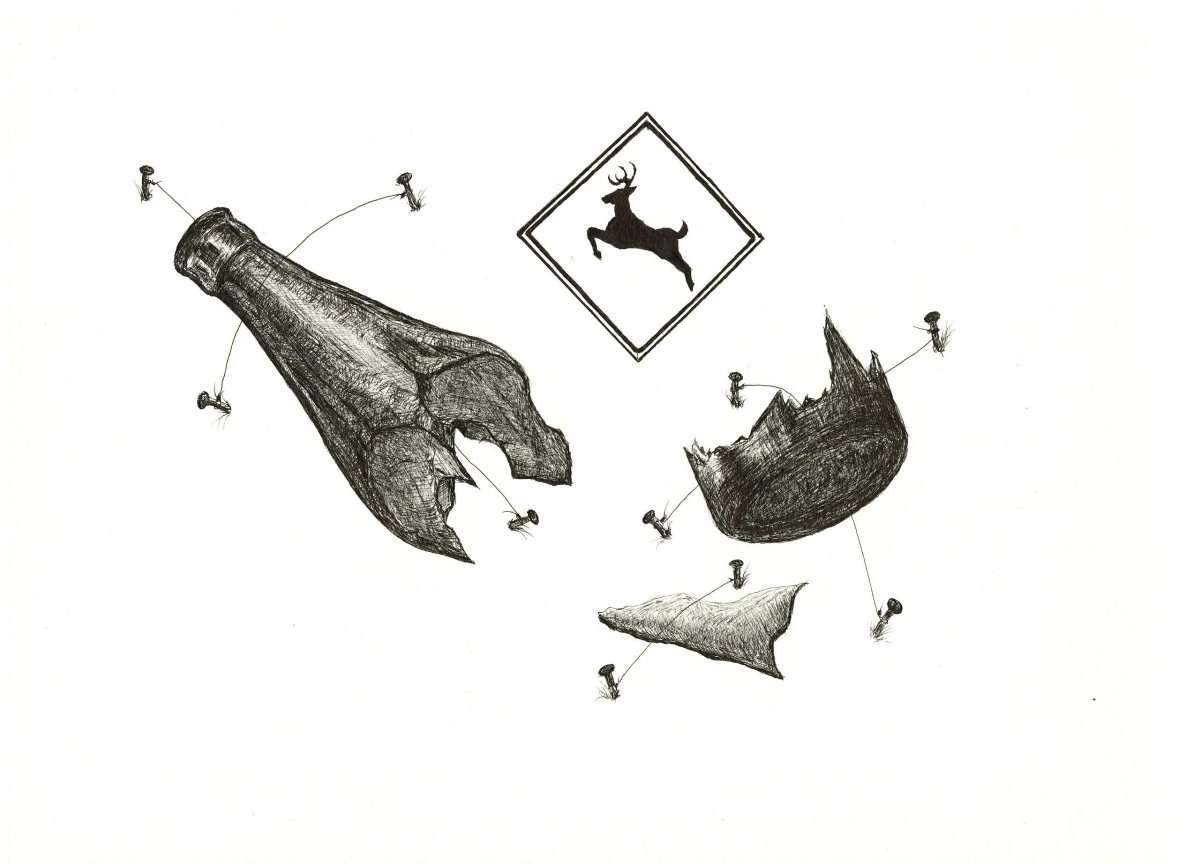


Fig. 17 - "Alcohol Induced Psychosis" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

My intervention with a client failed, and a history of violence, systemic racism, self-hatred and blind rage filled the gap. Do we see the transgenerational trauma that destroys from within? A blood-covered beer bottle on the floor.

This was a particularly difficult day. A pool of blood on the carpet, blood smeared by a hand across three doors, the fire escape covered in a trail of blood that rained down on the cars below. There is no theory or textbook to help with this. This particular person had lots of people staying with them all the time and there was always a lot of fighting. I told him he shouldn't keep having people stay or he would lose his apartment. The next week someone had their throat slashed. I am left feeling that I should have done something differently, wondering if I failed as an intervention worker, still carrying this years later, even though my psychologist friend told me I can't think like that. The client is now in prison; their victim lived.

The police came and left the scene without cordoning off the bloody staircase. Now the landlords are asking when it will be cleaned so they can rent the apartment again. Who cleans the blood? I have seen a fair amount of blood, mostly my own. The taste of blood is something I grew accustomed to.

Once, another frontline worker told me that drinking about a quarter of a bottle of Jack Daniel's numbs out the workday—of course, there are many coping mechanisms, stress eating etc.

Being in a “helping profession” but not being able to get any help for yourself, all of the talk about frontline workers being heroes is the most annoying thing ever when we are still underpaid, overworked, not given adequate pensions, and so on. Being called a hero doesn't really help, like being called a saint, unless it's paired with material support.

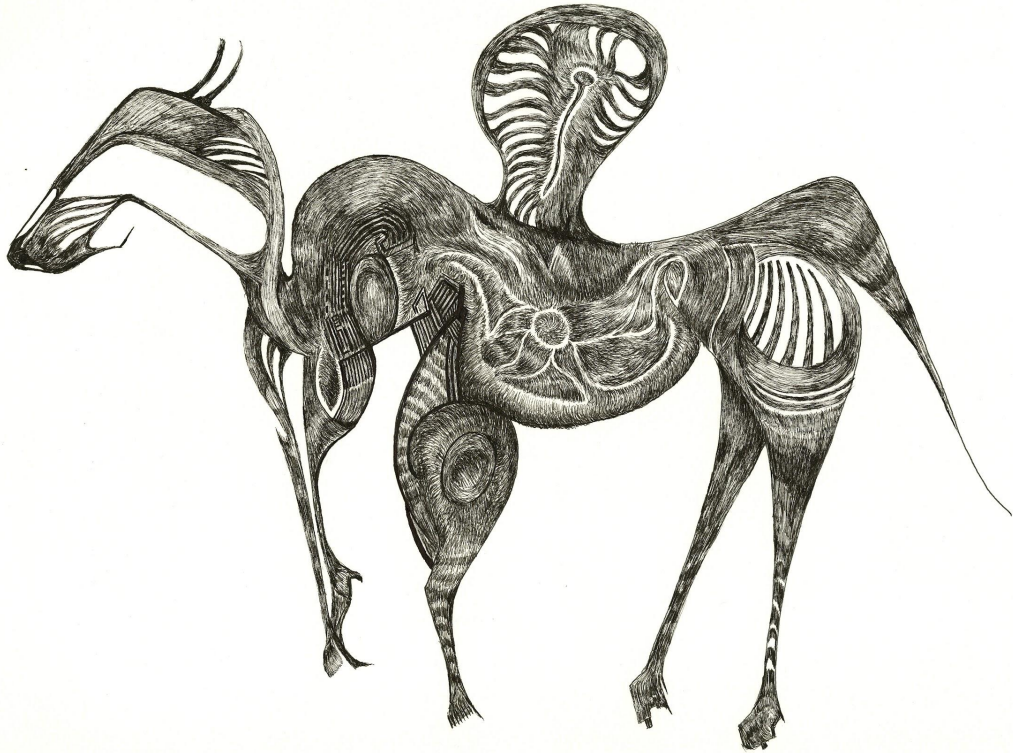


Fig. 18 - "Etruscan: Il Piccolo Bastardo" - ink drawing - 12"/18" - Rusty Nail series

The bastard, in this case, myself, hears the hooves of beatings and pain resonating through time. How many generations carry the trauma of truth before a cycle can be broken? The little bastard knows his name; it echoes in his mind as he lays down for the night.

My early childhood trauma resurfaces every time I speak with a client about their own trauma. No matter how much you work on yourself or see a psychologist, your history is always lingering. This profession takes its toll on you. If you resist it, the energy you used to rationalise your way through depletes the reserve of empathy you have, until nothing is left for those you love. I've wondered if my father also had this issue. Actually, I'm sure he did. It's a cycle of poverty, aggression and psychological violence



Fig. 19 - "The Subjects of Fables" - ink drawing - 12" /18" - Rusty Nail series

It is a comorbidity of fables that fails to bring about a moral lesson. The perception and structure of trauma without an obvious purpose for the immense suffering of the subjects. There may be no moral outcome, but giving structure to the pain does provide a moment of control over the chaos.

In this fable are you the songbird, the industrious frog or the bucket of rusty nails?

The stories we tell ourselves as children to survive the abuse or justify the actions of those we see as our caregivers end up skewing our response to similar situations.



Fig. 20 - "Transference and Countertransference Holding Us Together" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

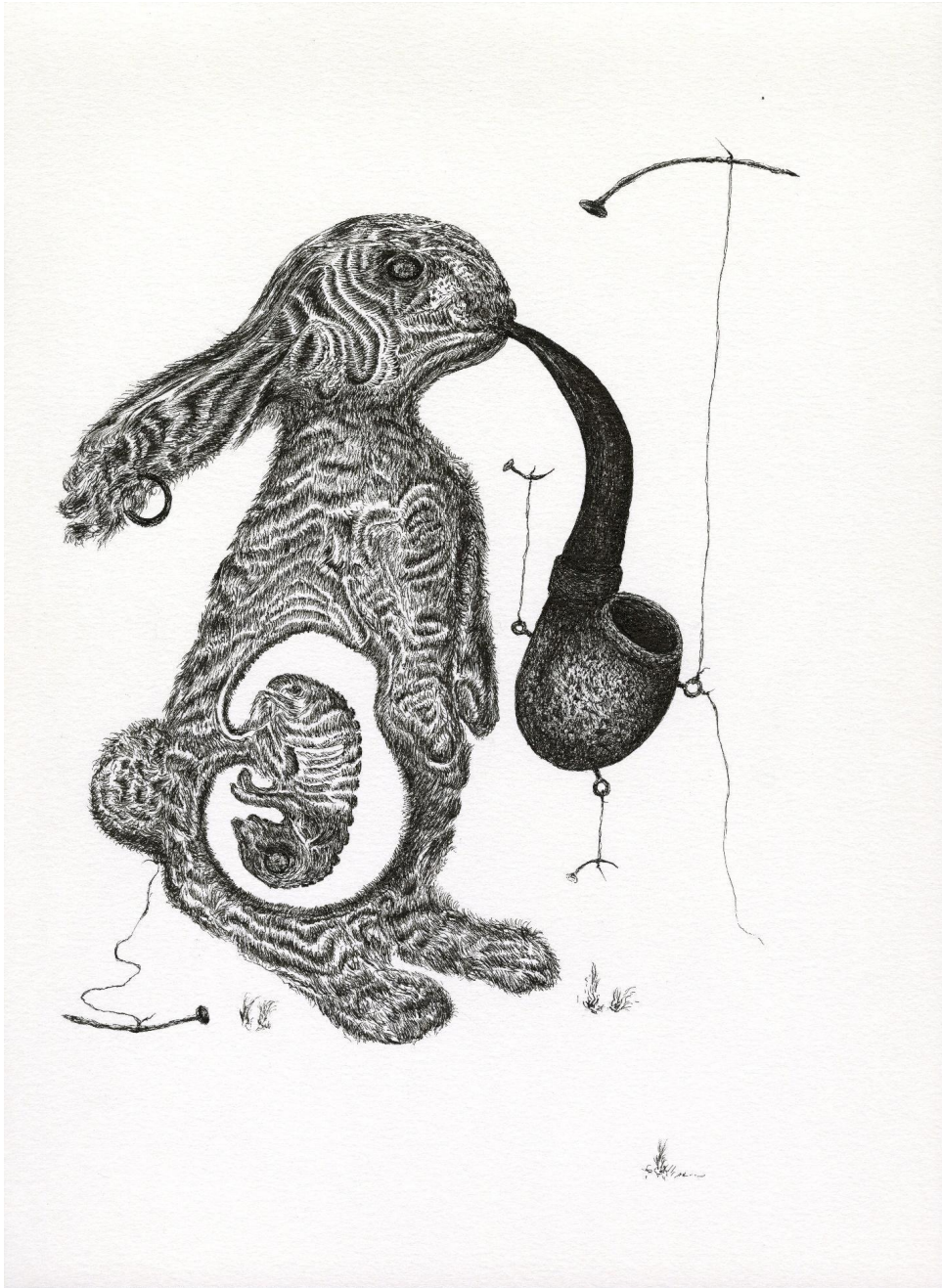


Fig. 21 - (ō'var-lāp') - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

The twisted narratives of the abuser and the victim both dwell in the same host, intertwined like a bird's nest of fishing line that often happens when you have too much line on the spool. Whatever the cause, the fishing stops until the nest is dealt with. Two choices are available: rip out the nest, cut the line and tie a joining knot; or slowly pull at the nest in every direction, until it comes apart and you can see where the line is tangled. Cutting the line will get you there sooner unless you still have too much line on the spool.

But what does a fisherman's nest have to do with a stuffed toy hare smoking a pipe and waiting to give birth to a raggedy stillborn tragedy?

We look for ourselves in the other and the other looks for themselves in us. We do this in every conversation whether we're aware of it or not. Our frustration with other people is usually from not being able to find some common ground. It's a strange thing to do as a profession—to try to make someone feel at ease, to make someone feel comfortable enough to open up to you. It's easy to compartmentalise and not think of this as your job. Then there's this idea of “remaining professional” when you're sharing lived experiences with clients. It's not like any other kind of job. When you're engaging with the thoughts and feelings of an individual it is a far more complex exchange which is extremely personal. An individual client is doing this with me, one person, but I'm doing this with eighteen other people, eighteen stories and lived experiences—the relationships they had with their fathers, mothers, friends and so on that they perhaps want to repair. In order to find common ground, you mirror the person/reach into your own experience with your mother etc. Projection inevitably happens as you look for sequences or similar things that may or may not be there; there are elements of their narratives that intertwine with yours when you're assuming things and you have to separate your life from their life. It's difficult to do when you see a pattern that is almost identical to something that you've experienced, which makes it easier to connect with someone but also makes it harder not to become enmeshed with the client. Sometimes it's both and you're not aware.

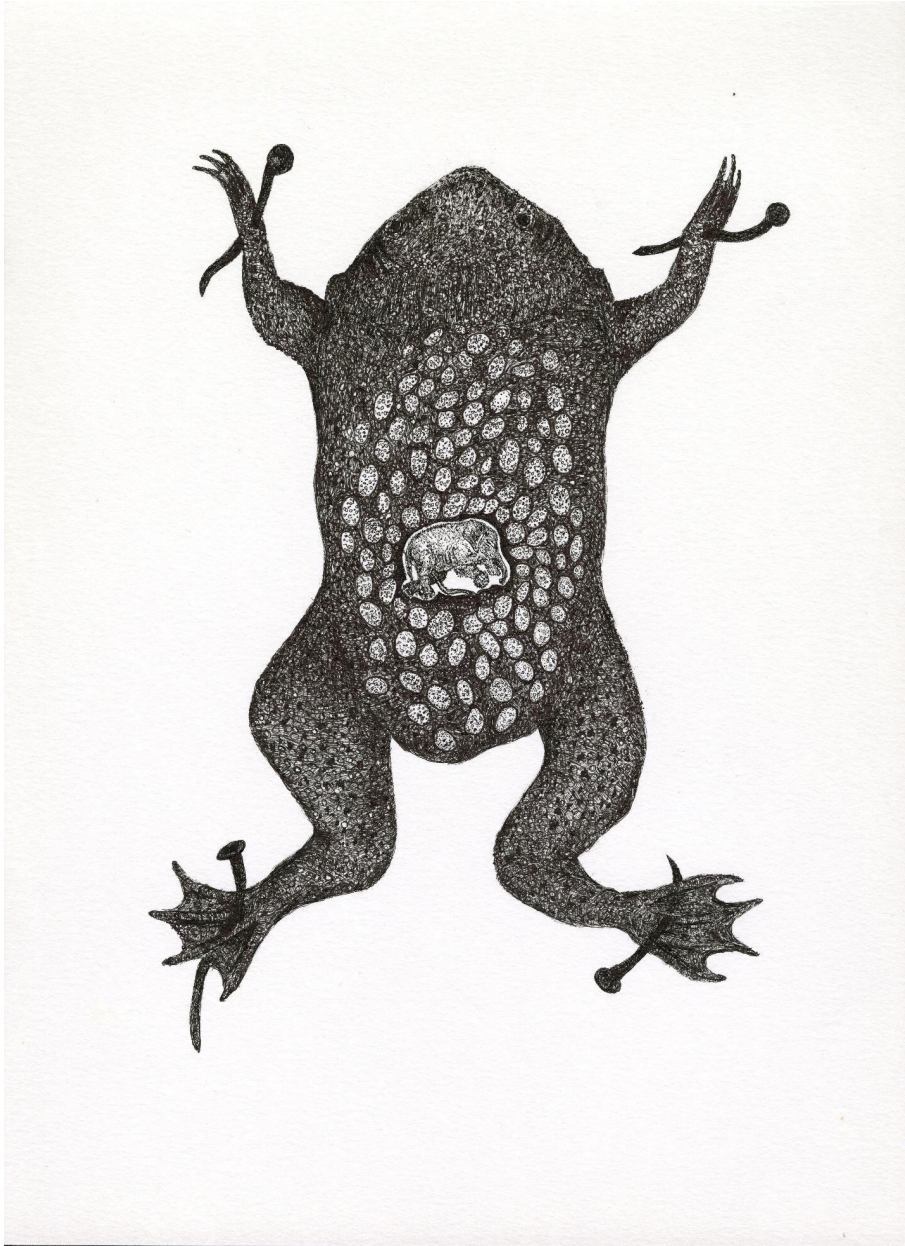


Fig. 22 - "Rana comú de celdillas feto elefante" - ink drawing - 11"/15 - Rusty Nail series

This week has stirred the waters. The Surinam toad carries its young until they hatch out of its back. The weight of its young balanced across its back. Feto elefante is a curse slowly crushing the Rana as it grows. The crushing crucifixion of imagination that tears at the soul.

Mental imagery is not imagination⁵⁴. Imagination is (typically) a voluntary act. Mental imagery can be, and very often is, involuntary. When we have flashbacks to an unpleasant scene, this is mental imagery, not imagination. Mental imagery is involuntary. The same goes for earworms: annoying tunes that go through our heads although we really don't want them to. Again, this is not auditory imagination, but it is auditory "mental imagery".

We emerge from the womb as an idea, which guides how we develop and take up space. In my case I feel that I am, or at least was, an idea that eventually ends up crushing the toad as I developed. The imagery that I use in my drawings deals with complex narratives that, for me, are outside of time. They are temporal poles that help me orient myself through emotional travels. Sometimes in a psychotic episode, individuals find themselves being attacked by creatures or people—hallucinations, auditory or visual. The threat and panic are real. The trauma has materialised in the senses of the person. My drawings are trying to find a home for them so my senses can be free from this weight.

⁵⁴Bence, Nanay. 1997. "Mental Imagery." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, November. <https://ramsey.stanford.edu/entries/mental-imagery/>.

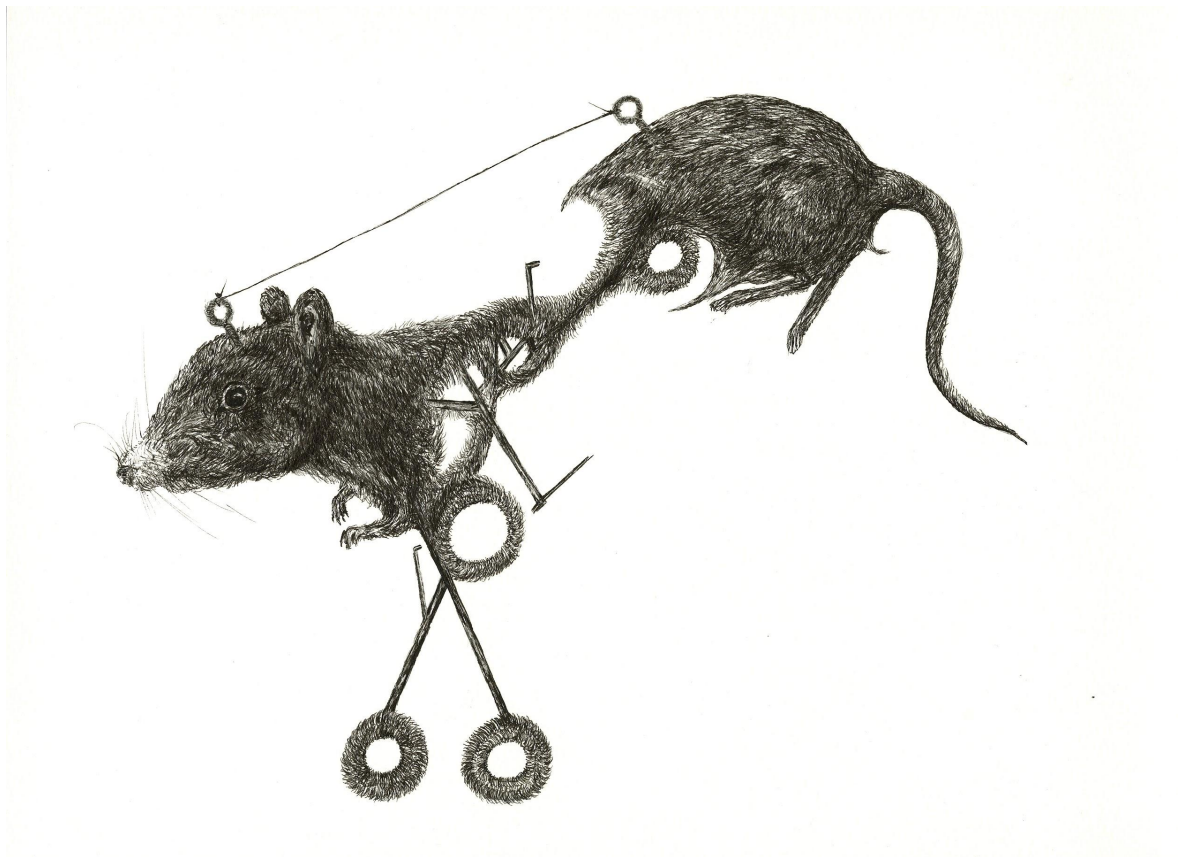


Fig. 23 - Rats of New York City - ink drawing - 11"/15"- Rusty Nail series

The sound of the traffic and impatience fills my ears as I try to decipher where the pain of this man can be found. He speaks. I listen after our conversation as he returns to his routine, and I return to mine. I wonder how he felt about what I said. Over the course of this job, I've explained to new colleagues about the difficulty of managing changing emotions and the effects of frequencies, vibrations, and navigating space. Being neurodiverse, my sensitivity has been a benefit, while at times extremely debilitating. The aspect that few understand is that when you work within the institution you become accustomed to the building's acoustics and spatial orientation. The interactions that occur between you as a worker and the client are defined and somewhat orchestrated by the protocols and procedures that are set and defined by the organisation. Contrary to this, the participant sets the tone in our interactions as they take place in the public sphere or in their own apartment. The dynamic effect of space on a conversation is palpable as is the shift in power dynamics. In studying this shift, I came across three theories that

helped me comprehend the complex societal structures that explained the mechanism of our interactions. The first that I came across was the “Locus of Control” developed by Julian B. Rotter in 1954. This was pivotal to my understanding of control as it pertained to the shelter systems and institutions that have influenced and shaped our minds. Briefly, those who express an external locus of control feel that elements such as Fate, Government, and God, hold a higher degree of sway over their lives. Those that have a stronger sense of internal control believe that they have greater control of their outcomes based on their decision-making. I’ve felt that this theory has helped position me in understanding the lived experiences of the person I was speaking with.

The second theory was proxemics, which is the study of how humans utilise space. This allowed me to analyse how, over the period of several years, our interactions and conversations would be affected. Edward T. Hall highlighted the impact of proxemic behaviour⁵⁵ and it is in this theory that I witnessed not only the shift of my clients but became very aware of how I moved through space and interacted with each individual. Finally, and very recently, I came across the idea and term “spatial empathy” and how this relates to personal space. In essence, how comfortable am I in situations where I feel ownership over a set space? Am I willing to be vulnerable so others may feel welcomed? It is closely linked to the idea of proxemics but places the locus of control internally.

⁵⁵Hall, Edward T., Ray L. Birdwhistell, Bernhard Bock, Paul Bohannon, A. Richard Diebold, Marshall Durbin, Munro S. Edmonson, et al. 1968. “Proxemics [and Comments and Replies].” 9, No. 2/3 (1968): 83–108. [Http://www.jstor.org/stable/2740724](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2740724).” *Current Anthropology* 9 (2/3): 83–108.

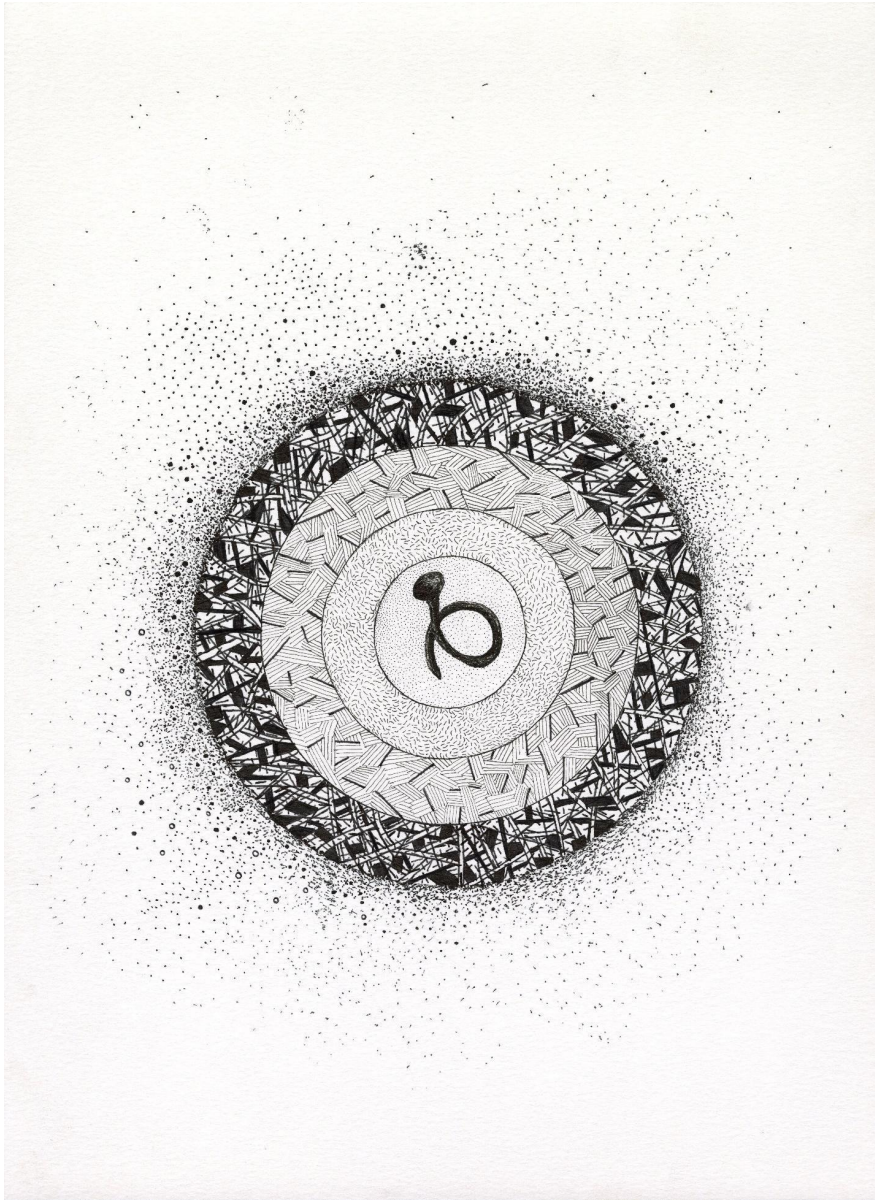


Fig. 24 - "Mitigating Compassion—Proxemics of Fear" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

Moving through space with compassion and empathy among vulnerable communities can be difficult. I often feel as if words fail me and now is no exception—last week was difficult and tomorrow like so many frontline workers we do our best to mitigate our collective fear. What has sustained me is the philosophical rigour of moving away from certainty towards clarity, in this action find hope.

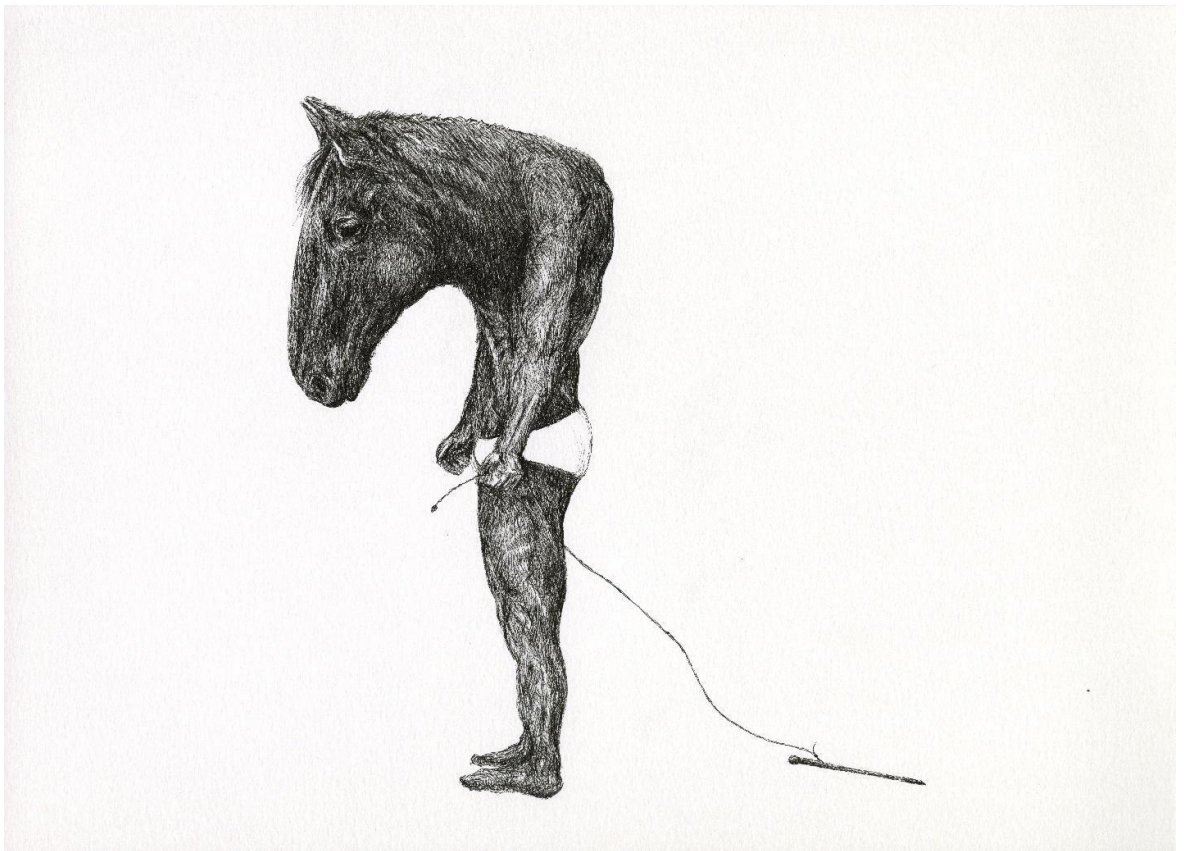


Fig. 25 - "Human Qualities" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - rusty nail series

Please take a moment to answer a few questions. *There is a door which all men pass through, each service, each institution has a room where he must lay down his story for councillors or frontline workers. Each story unfolds on a shadowed timeline, the tragedy emerges as an overlapping narrative of memories. The listener does not know what to believe, the truth is subjective and malleable, and, unlike a fable that brings you to a moral conclusion, these stories have no beginning or end. The listener rather judges from their bell curve of tragedy. The animals of a fable are less than men but find themselves governed by the laws of men.*

Hobbes' idea of the Leviathan⁵⁶ was society as a complete beast—the governing body of the corpus would ideally be a spiritual or divine leader, who would speak for God, based on the church as the body of Christ. That was the origin of the social contract, the basis for all society.

Bringing someone who has been homeless back into the social contract without having adequate support to deal with all of the sensory and bodily issues that come along with trauma is an incredibly complex task.

The modernist paradigm of religious change takes several things for granted, all of which are questionable. In essence changeable and dynamic, sometimes in support of the order of the state, other times critical or even in subversive opposition, the Christian religion is assumed to be in time: revelatory of the past, prophetic of the future, and devoted to the Crucified God who intervenes in history, ultimately through “the mysticism of suffering”. All that leaves “traditional religion” caught in the other half of the dichotomy—the tradition is thus unchanging, static, timeless, out of time and out of history. Within the traditional lay, other stereotypes exist, including the conservative or patriarchal legitimization of reinforcing received norms and values, upholding authority, and communal consensus, backing morality with collective effervescence, and of being founded in the certainty about the nature of reality.

⁵⁶Hobbes, Thomas, and Ian Shapiro. (1651) 2010. *Leviathan : Or, the Matter, Form and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*. New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press.

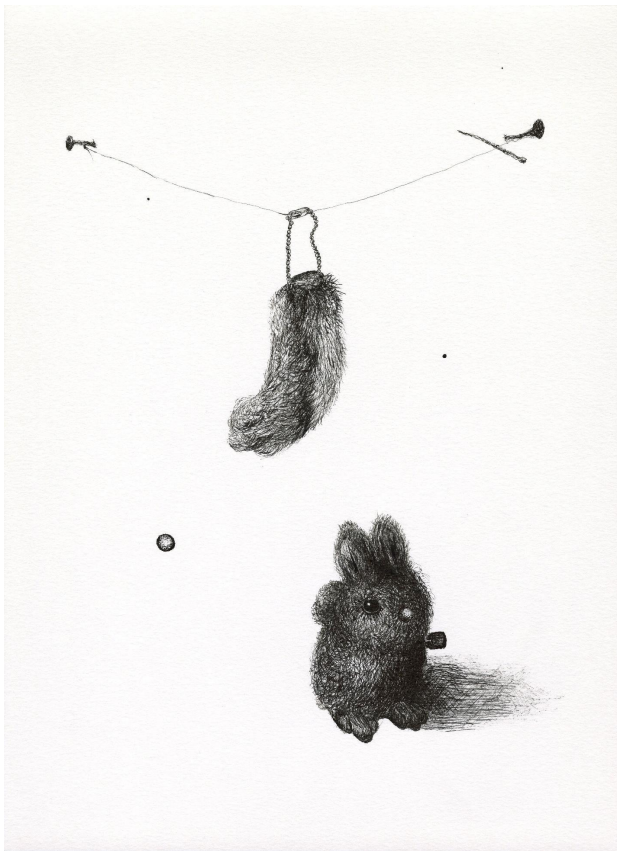


Fig. 26 - "Mechanical Faith" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

The structure of society develops spaces of transactions and transitions. Functions of faith wind up the tiny mechanical bunny as it takes a leap of faith until it topples. For a dollar a lucky rabbit's foot can be purchased; amputated limbs have no use but as an amulet of false protection.

There are few jobs that require you to visit multiple institutions in one day let alone one week. How does this affect my locus of control? My clients live or have lived in these spaces, some will never leave. Do I want to protect them from themselves, or do I just want them to accept what I see as a normal existence? If given a choice between a place where everyone thought that I was ill or unable to care for myself, would I not choose the anonymity of the street? I enter these spaces travelling across the city directed by signs and traffic laws, entering repurposed buildings once having housed convents, monasteries, and other church bureaucracy. While few still enter cloistered religious professions, the

use of the buildings hasn't drastically changed, the charity of the church having passed slowly into the purview of the public sector in the age of secularism.

I imagine a garden and architecture that do not dominate or impose, doors that are not barred and grey. Could we create a space like this for those who suffer? Perhaps we could, but we won't. Simply because the users of these facilities are not included in the designing of their existence. Rather, we have buildings built by belief and economic slavery that are empty and need to serve a purpose. These heritage sites are protected from development, like so many giant gravestones.

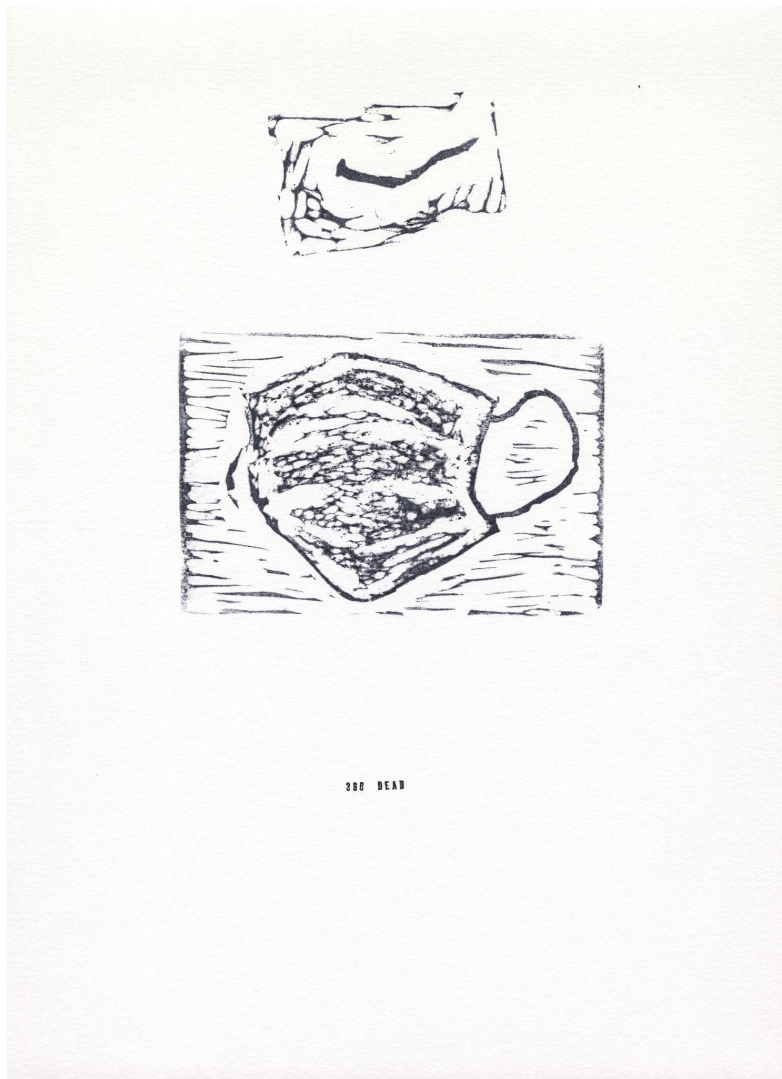


Fig. 27 - "My Cousin Daniel - 360 Dead" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

The vulnerable are easily counted when they are dead. The pandemic revealed the societal gaps which soon became chasms of despair. Those with no homes are easily seen as the curfew falls and people sequester themselves.

During the first wave of Covid in 2020 I was already feeling the effects of burnout. As colleagues quit or took medical leave, I waited either for their return or for their positions to be filled so that I could also take a sick leave. A round-robin of sick leaves and people quitting to save their lives. During the first couple of years in this job, I was just grasping at understanding the sheer chaos of homelessness, and how few services are available for this ever-growing societal crisis. Even now in my 7th year of doing this work, I am

astounded at how we inevitably become all and nothing but a witness to the exclusionary way that the system avoids helping the most vulnerable clients, excluding them based on their needs because the system is already overwhelmed. Those with family or friends advocating on their behalf end up receiving better care. Often, after I've worked on helping clients face the issues that were slowly destroying them, there was little or no support after I left their aid. A client might end up at the emergency room, where they would immediately be given papers to sign for refusing treatment, which they usually signed, though most were incapable of reading either due to literacy or issues with language. And then back out into the street. The cost of a hospital bed vs the cost of a human life.

This knowledge eats away at hope, seeing that prejudice and cognitive biases exclude individuals from social exchange. I feel a sense of hopelessness as I see repeatedly how society victimises the most vulnerable. The pandemic has turned what were societal gaps into sinkholes. That is, those who have been homeless or now exist in extreme poverty have seen less of a change in their social isolation. Of those who were teetering on the poverty line, most have lost their source of income and their sense of hope.

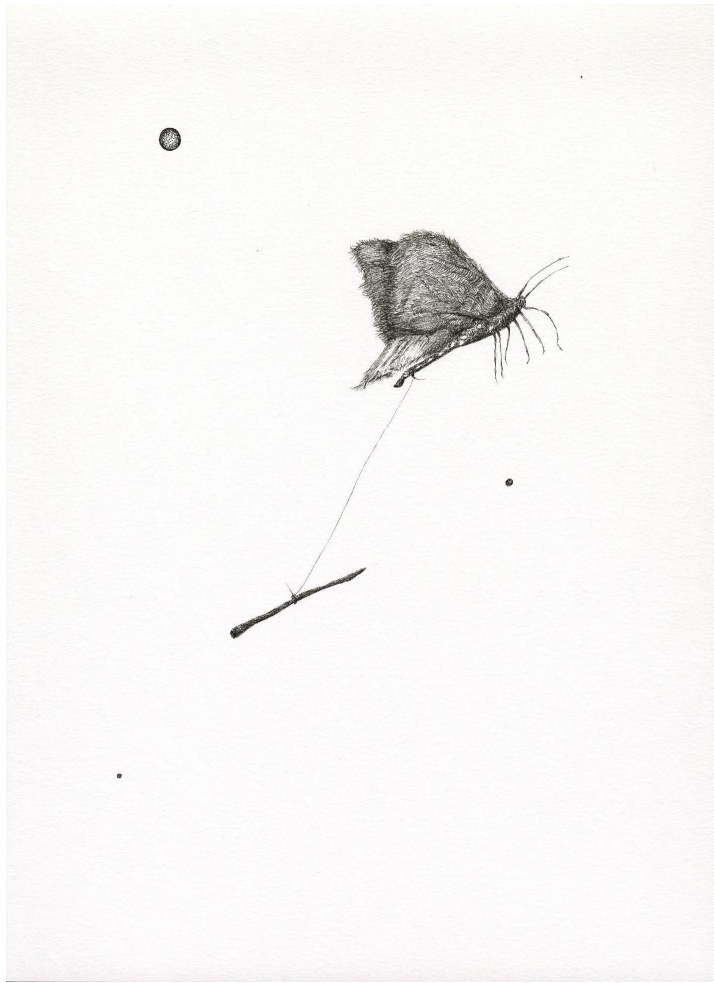


Fig. 28 - "The Bell Rang" - ink drawing - 11"/ 15" - Rusty Nail series

Unaware, the woolly moth dragged a nail.

Tension between hope and despair. Over four years of working with a client, you may not see progression. The clients that drink themselves to death, the crying mothers of children with addiction. You end up caring for the people that your parents told you to stay away from.

The economics of homelessness are more complex than one might imagine. Hidden homelessness and couch surfing, the sexual abuse of people as "payment" for lodging. When you grow up in poverty and instability it's harder to assess the dangers of certain situations because it's typical of your experience. A feeling of "well that's just the way it is", and you can't imagine anything being different. Many of my clients who grew up in under-

housed situations describe witnessing parents having sex or assaulting someone in homes that were too small for an entire family to live.

Women are often those whose homelessness is invisible—many women couch surf, stay in abusive relationships, stay with people in exchange for sexual favours, and other precarious and unhealthy situations. Not having your name on a lease makes you precarious, whoever has the lease has the power.



Fig. 29 - "Silent" - ink drawing - 9"/12" - Rusty Nail series

Community, society, and the balance of mitigating hunger—registering for food. Show your welfare pass, please prove that you are poor. Show your 500-dollar-a-month government subsistence. Picking up frozen milk and food on the precipice of spoil—no longer able to function in the capitalization of supply and demand. Recycled food as constructed inflation skyrockets. Clients of reinsertion in their apartment feeling caught between hunger and pride—please provide proof of your inability to care for yourself. Be thankful as many around the world are starving to death. During COVID you need to set up an appointment by phone or by email—how can you without access to either? You can go to McDonald's, use their Wi-Fi and watch everyone else eat as you try to register. How

do you feed three thousand families without the paperwork to process? Food stamps, register online, please. Universal income is the only way to not further increase the stress and trauma around food security. Registering for food is such a strange concept—filling out paperwork to survive. Standing in a line to keep yourself from starving. In a country with unlimited resources.

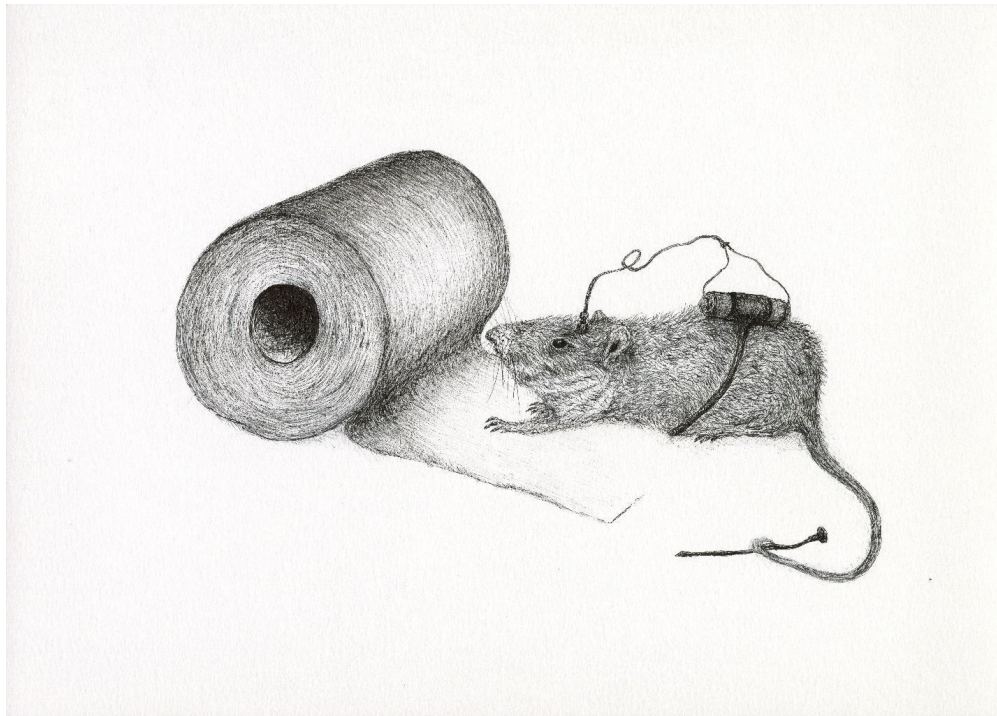


Fig. 30 - "Rat Lab Quarantine / Electric Brain Stimulation" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

August 2022

During the first months of covid, the profiteering and fear-based nature of humanity caused severe shortages as individuals stocked their cupboards and coffers. Legislation was passed to protect PPE against profiteers who stockpiled masks, hand sanitizer, and other such products. Temporary stop gaps were put in place to prevent evictions and for a moment people were given a reprieve. Now two years later rent has doubled as inflation rises, condos and other air bnb's remain vacant for the travellers wanting to save on their leisure vacations. The precarious nature of housing has not been this delicate for decades. Homelessness is a construct of profiteering; it is blatant and sustained. Governments for a moment, to curb the spread of COVID, protected against profiteering. Why is there never legislation that restricts the profits on housing? A simple answer is that the government needs Property Tax dollars and that real estate is a blue chip stock where insider trading is protected and encouraged. The fact that insufficient social housing has been built in Canada is easily seen—tent cities are ubiquitous in every city as they are torn down and rebuilt.

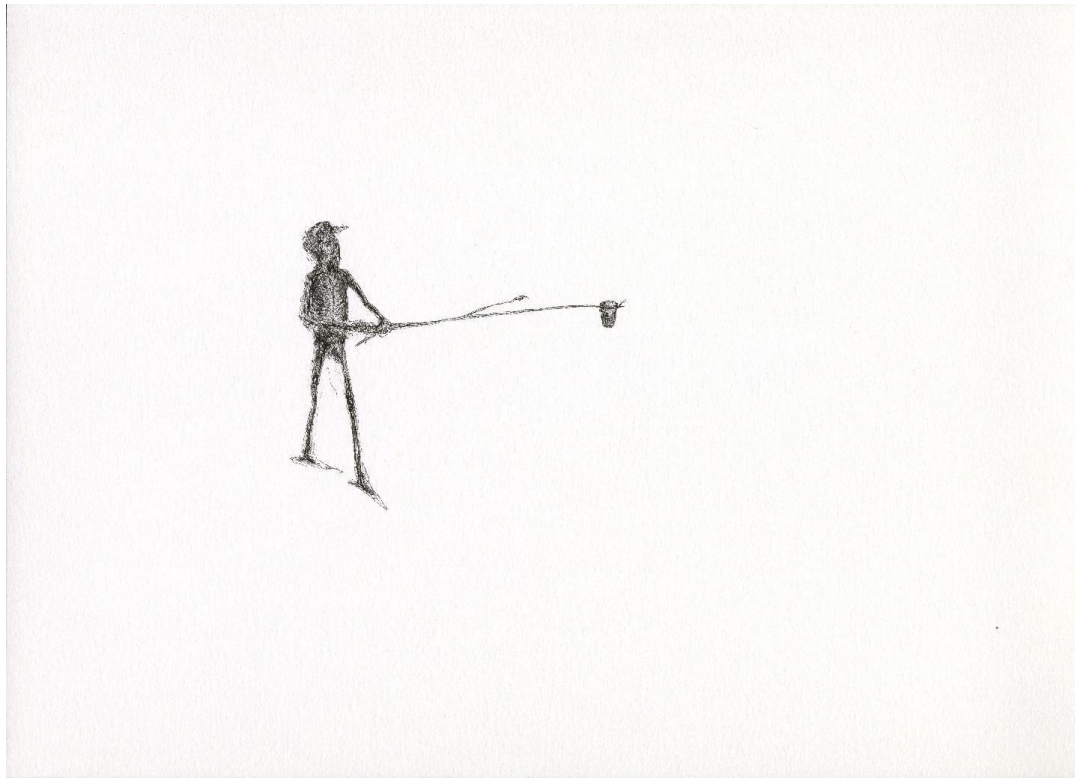


Fig. 31 - *Spatial Empathy* - ink drawing - 11"/ 15" - *Rusty Nail* series

Beggar, ruby, hoboes, bum, homeless, destitute, vagabond, vagrant, wanderer, outcast, refugee, forsaken, displaced, exiled, down-and-out, itinerant, junkies, addict, mental case, retard, fucked, whore, crack whore, prosti, lazy, street punks, low life, squeegee kid, backwash, stoner, wino, urinal cake, street bum, orphan, street rat, homeless tan, tramps, punks, the poor, degenerate, druggy...

Today is the first of the month, the day that social aid money is deposited into people's accounts. Here it occurs once a month, but there are many studies that have shown that a biweekly dispersal reduces stress for people dependent on this money, since most other jobs pay on a bi-weekly schedule. It is yet another instance in which the vulnerable are asked by the system to budget 600.00 dollars (on the high end), after rent, for a whole month. This allows for approximately 20 dollars a day.

In the last week of the month borrowing from loan sharks for sundry items or cigarettes is up at a very high interest rate and a high physical threat. Before the check is ever deposited, hundreds will be owed for the previous month.

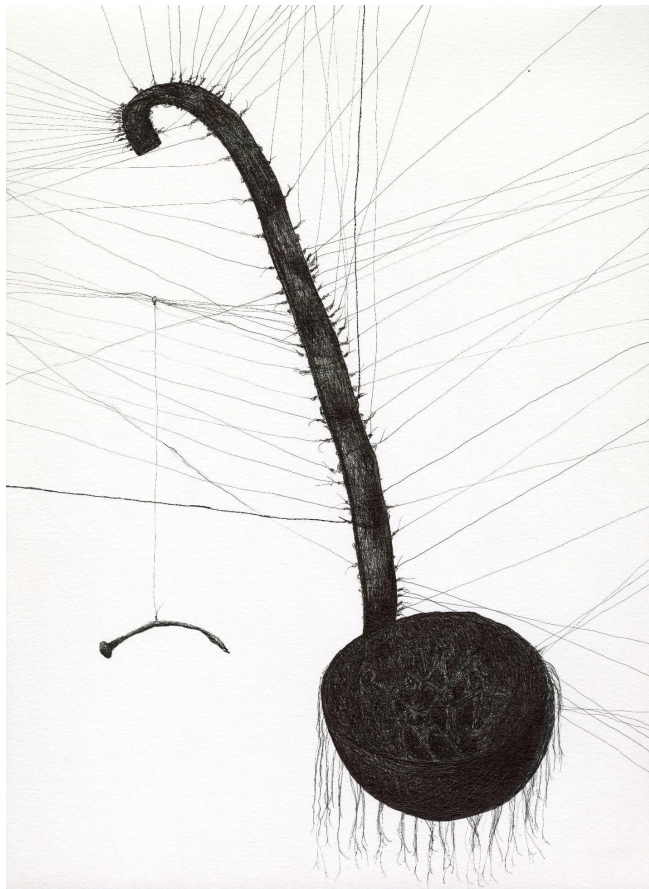


Fig. 32 - "Ladle" - ink drawing - 11"/ 15" - Rusty Nail series

Today I am a 4-year-old trapped in a 40-year-old man's body. I'm overwhelmed by the multiple calls and the anxiety of my clients calling and expressing their anxiety of not having money to find food, pay their phone bills, pay their cable bills, and the fear of dealing with the repercussions of bounced deposits in their bank account, further putting themselves in a state of poverty. Images are flashing to my mind of a four-litre spring water bottle filled with pennies. When things were really bad at home my parents would pull out this giant jar of pennies and we would roll them to make some sort of small dent, or pay off the banks, or decrease the debt. Every time I saw that jar, I had terrible anxiety. Today with Phil visiting a client, who was suicidal recently, I am overwhelmed. I am synthesising all these emotions, all of these feelings from my clients, who have been calling me since 7 a.m. I'm having multiple flashbacks to my own poverty and fear. Proust spoke about the smell of Madeleine. I remember the smell of copper pennies on my fingertips.



Fig. 33 - "Compensations of Poverty" - ink drawing - 11"/ 15" - Rusty Nail series

Leisure is allotted in relation to work, suffering is allotted by the compensations of poverty.

In our capitalist system, the economics of suffering has become an industry. Under-resourced, the welfare system is maintained, but never fully given what is required to meet or surpass the need. The justification for such inaction is seen as a handout and not a hand-up. The welfare user is seen as a freeloader, stigmatised for their inability to function, labelled and accused. Women and children first is an easier sell, in terms of gaining empathy, as they are seen as vulnerable and weak, unable to care for themselves fully in a patriarchal system. Men are supposed to thrive in such a system, so little or no care is given to these invisible men who are indoctrinated to suffer in shame and silence.

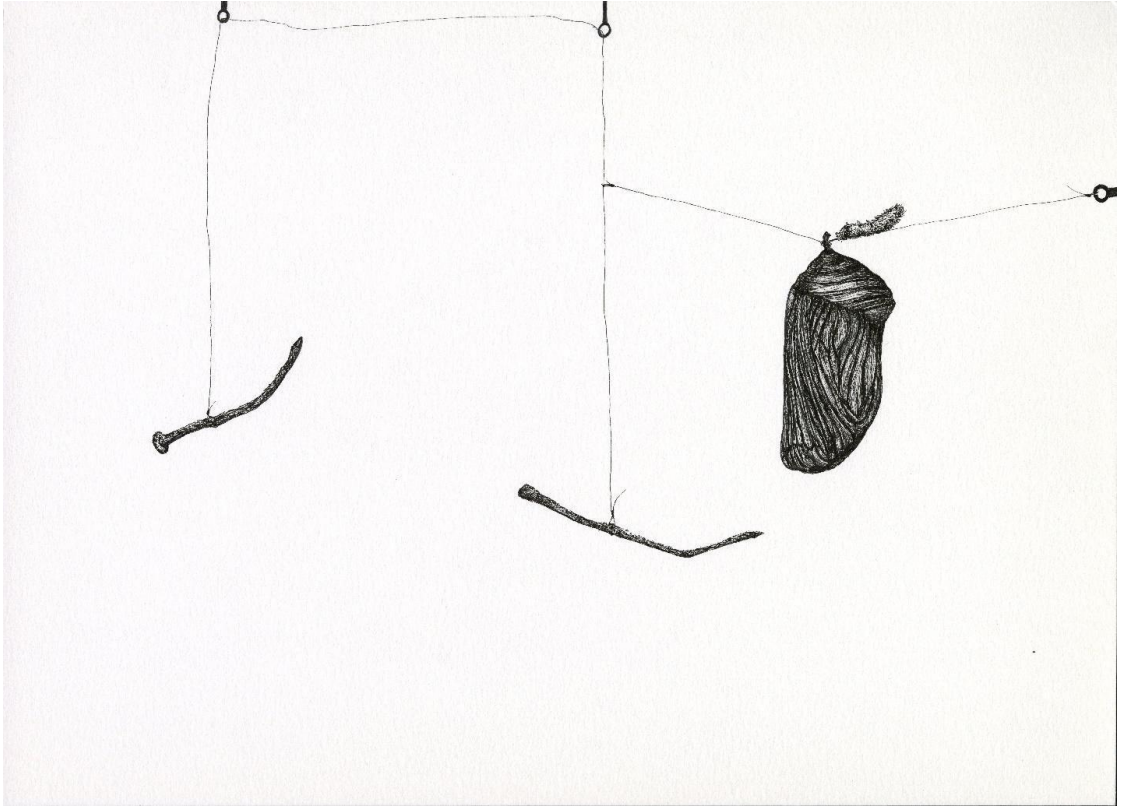


Fig. 34 - Chrysalis - ink drawing- 11"/15"- Rusty Nail series

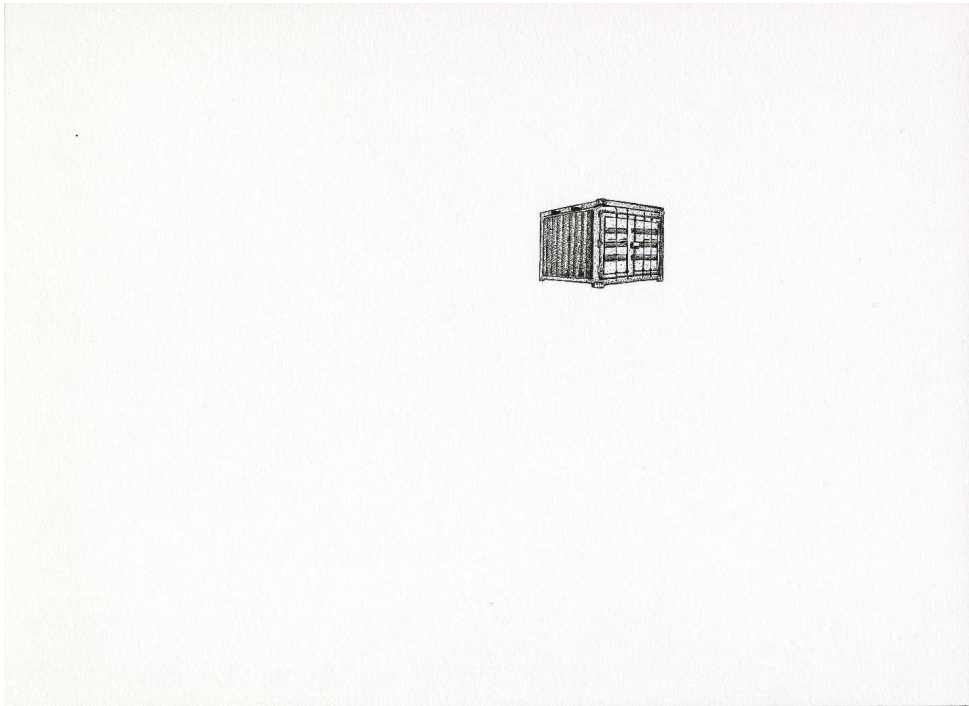


Fig. 35 - "Autonomy Contained" - ink drawing- 11"/15"- Rusty Nail series

"Autonomous" was the human service word of the day. We help people from the street into extreme poverty, where they might become "autonomous". Are we really autonomous? Do we not rely on our jobs to feed ourselves, our friends and family to care for us? On the labour of so many strangers to produce and deliver all the necessities for survival? How is this idea defined by the governing social services network? Why do we assume that these individuals are not because they need care? "Autonomous" should really be replaced by the term independent! Independent or dependent— "dependent" is a financial term used on your income tax returns. Dependent on the state, dependent on social services, dependent on food banks, dependent on minimum wage employment— the workhouses. Who is independent in our society? It is the person who is able to financially partake in the social exchange.

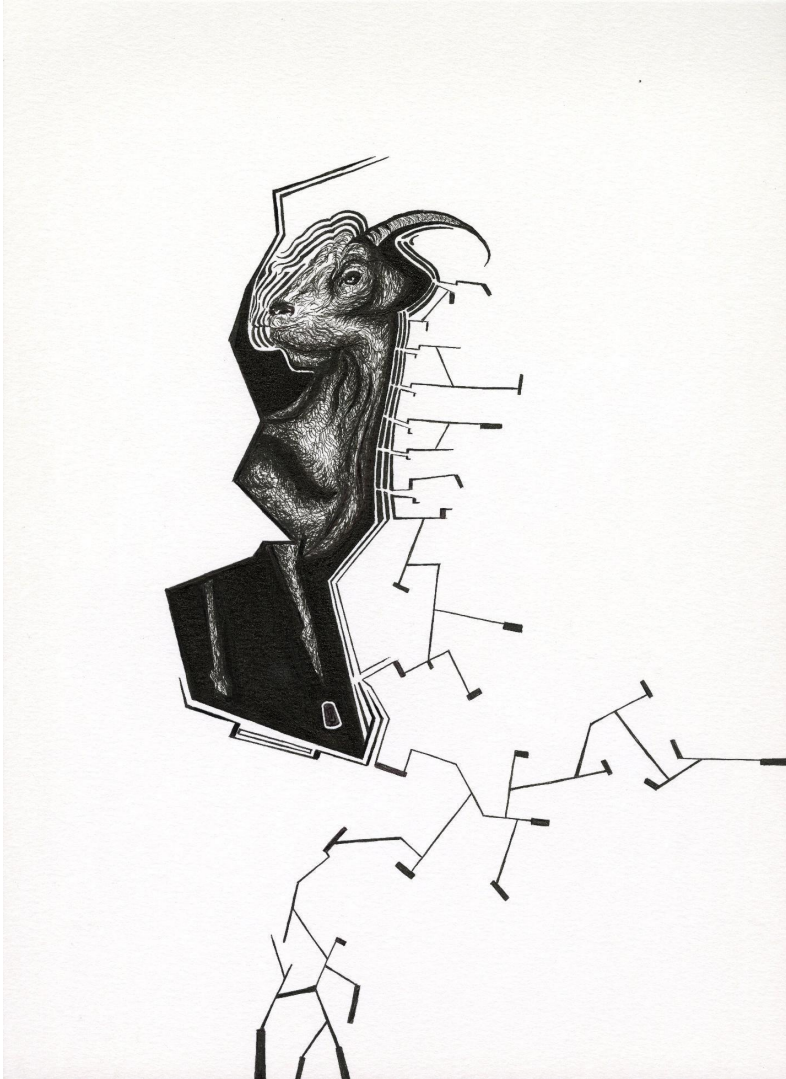


Fig. 36 - "Pattern" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

There is a pattern, a path that is well worn and easily taken, it is familiar, a sense of warm dysfunction, it holds you tight and seems like love then it slowly constricts.

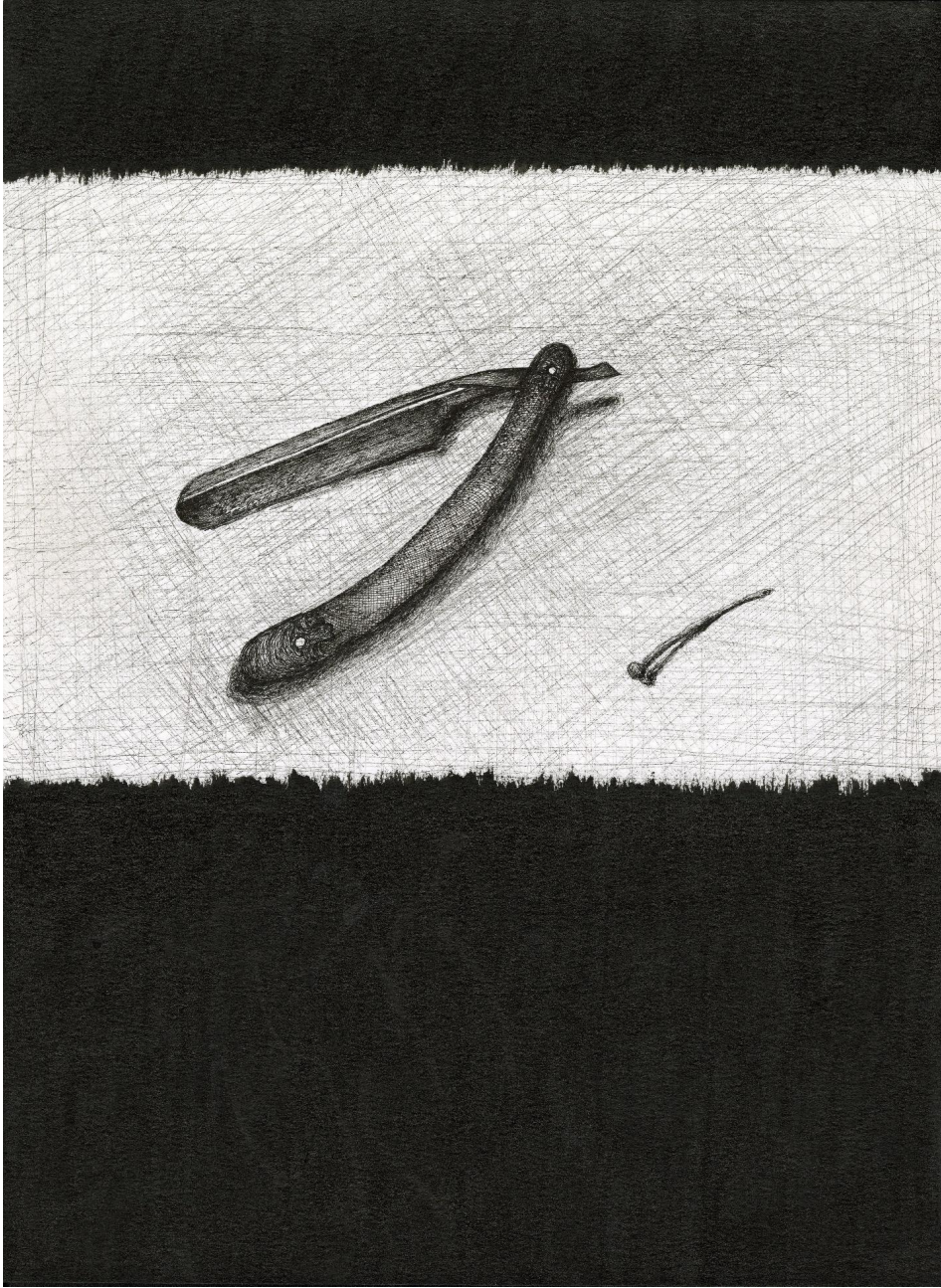


Fig. 37 - "Straight Blade" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

A few items filled his pockets. In the presence of darkness, each is an object of protection. Preparing for violence in some form limits the trauma of that which has occurred.

Relational perspectives of objects: what in their lives do they carry around in their sacks, and what is the significance? Entering into the void of the apartment ends up affecting you

more than them because you still have a lot of stuff. I often end up reflecting on what is actually necessary, and the thin line between being an artist and a hoarder.

What role does speculation play in the structures we create, organising chaos, be it our own or others? Today I am trying to help a client who believes he has Havana Syndrome, and that he is being followed. I listen and nod that I hear his fear. A teenager asks for directions. This person is suspicious to my client, though she is deemed acceptable. The larger narrative doesn't really need her to be a main character. I share my experiences with auditory and waking hallucinations—this seems to land. Should I push a little more? I reassure him that he is under stress and afraid of the physical effects. The sensory aspects of his experience are real, we just differ on the cause. Where is our common ground? Is it that I am standing with him, now, in this park? The wind on the corner is whipping through me; he barely feels it. He was standing all night in a building's mudroom, afraid to go to his apartment down the street. I see a parking attendant ready to ticket me. Luckily, I can explain my reason for being parked badly. We both laugh and we find common ground on how space is ticketed, and behaviour enforced. She is kind and doesn't issue a ticket.



Fig. 38 - "Night Patrol" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

At what point do you feel as if you've done enough? There are days like today when all compassion has been drained from my body. In human services, this is known as compassion fatigue. I've never quite understood how I've recovered from it in the past, or how to stop it from happening again. There are these moments when I feel I have nothing left to give, but the obligation to answer the phone, to visit a client, to provide some form of care, remains.

It is strange to be in a room with someone who is suffering while you feel hollow.

I am writing this at 3:45 am. I can't sleep. My shift begins at 8:00 am, and I don't think that I will be able to fall asleep before then. I pace the apartment with my cat—I think he is happy that I am on patrol.



Fig. 39 - "A Disorganised Mind" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

Memories that were strung together hold a space that never existed. I hear the stories and feel the pain. I'm not sure what is real!

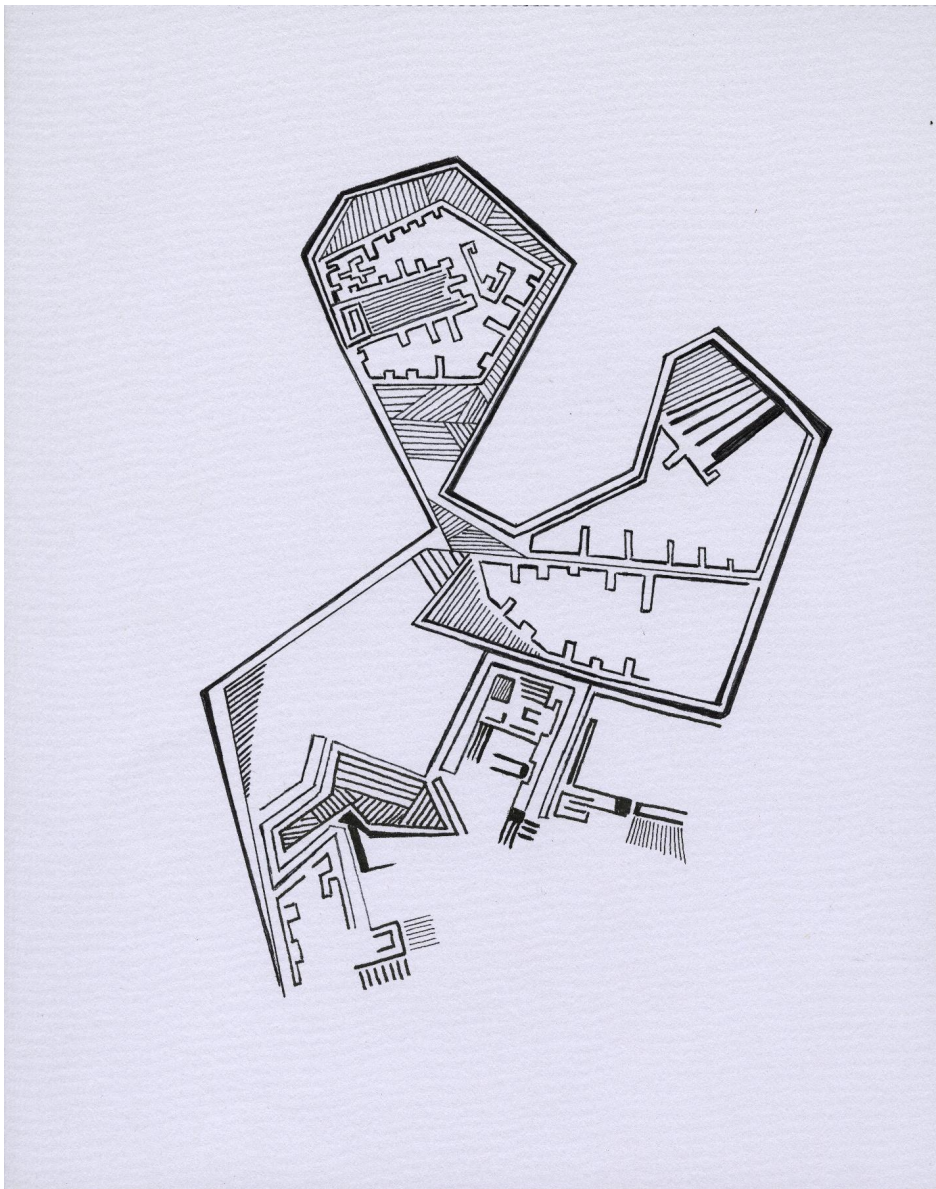


Fig. 40 - "Fuck You Rorschach" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

If you have a half-functional memory, you remember the judgement of adults and the endless assessments as you try and navigate elementary school. Children with stable environments have an easier time developing closer bonds. I tried, but this was not the path before me. Inevitably, as you work with individuals that have endured trauma, you flashback to points in your life. There is a texture to time, a pattern of recognition, thought.

It was grade three and I remember it clearly. I was called out from the back of the class and told that I was going to speak to a man. I walked to the nurse's office and was shown

a series of inkblots. "What do you see?" I wanted to say *judgement*, but I stuck to the script: a flower, a butterfly, a face. The man wrote in his little book. I was confused. Why was I here? What had I done? I had started a new school and I wasn't doing well.

Pattern recognition, locus of control, and proxemics have presented me with a system of evaluation that enables me to separate my own thoughts from others'. That is to say, the immense pain, suffering, and trauma present daily in my job. However, what I have realised after these many years is that I cannot stop the effects of pain that my body is being subjected to. I can separate the thoughts, that is to say, I know that I am not the same child crying himself to sleep as my client shares his story of fear.

The destructive problem, though, is that in order to be able to connect and empathise, I am inevitably subject to anxiety, pain, depression, and every other toll that living with trauma takes. I have realised that I can no longer work in this field without causing myself lasting harm. Perhaps it is too late?

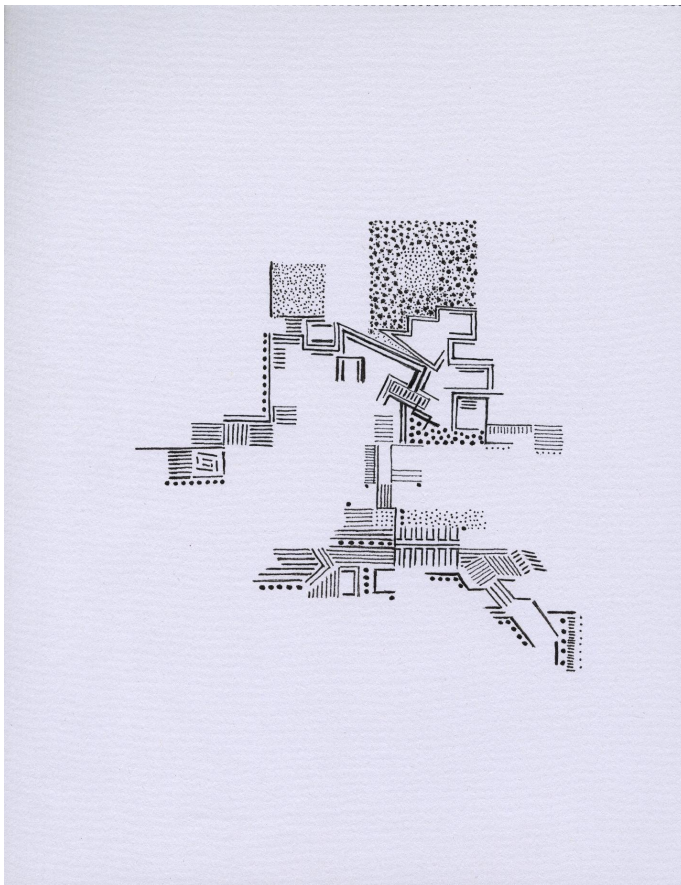


Fig. 41 - "Fuck You Rorschach (part two)" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

I want to say that there is a uniform sound to trauma, but it isn't a sound, it isn't a look, not one sense, rather a feeling of all of your senses drowning each other.

I hear the phone ring, and the vibration of it on the table unsettles me. I know I should answer, I want to answer, but I am unable. I am too vulnerable. I have absorbed too much pain this week. There is nothing left for me to give. Friends and family are cut off until I can return from this place. Early morning calls—no one calls unless there is a problem.



Fig. 42 - "Fragmented Memory" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

Fragments of memories forced together to survive the onslaught of the city. I feel the fear of the streets coming in waves. For some, there is no escape from extreme poverty after a certain age. Who will hire a broken man? What value does he have if no one will hire him? He is dependent on the social aid check. There is no holiday from this eternal suffering.

I feel immense guilt getting my paycheck as a caseworker, even at the lower end of the pay scale. I am paid to provide psychosocial assistance, but how useful is this assistance, really, when the overwhelming issues are economic? Strategies to remain calm in extreme poverty. Earplugs to drain out the noise of screaming neighbours. Recommend a walk, it's only -20 during the winter. Breathing exercises in a room with no objects or art, just a "kit de depart" provided by the government. A TV that doesn't even have an antenna. I can remind my clients that this is an improvement in their circumstances—

remember what the street was like? Remember what sleeping with 80 men in a room was like? Remember the fear you had when you heard a sound in the night and thought you were going to be attacked? Remember how you survived? Now accept this apartment and be grateful. I return home to my wife and cat, wondering what I did to deserve my modest but comfortable life.



Fig. 43 - "Rat" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series



Fig. 44 - "Coffee on the Wall" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

I have worked, and continue to work, with some real weirdos and I love each and every one of them. It takes a special type of person to do this type of work, and, more than any specific trait or training, it requires an incredible amount of stubbornness to actually help improve someone's situation. That is if you survive the secondary trauma and inevitable burnout or sick leave. To do this you must get up each day and find a mustard seed of hope to move the mountain of constructed systemic suffering in order to help one individual accomplish one necessary task.

One particular weirdo I work with has made the last six years of work survivable. Christian Rasytinis has been more than a colleague, or even a friend, more like a comrade in arms. There is a reason that "frontline", a military term, is used in human services: you are

continuously assaulted with blasts of psychological trauma. Christian and I have entered apartments together and encountered suffering that nothing could prepare you for. In these darkest moments, we found joy in each other. Christian always signed off his emails with “create a wonderful day”.

Due to the low wages and little to no psychological support, your colleagues inevitably become an ad-hoc therapy group for dealing with the trauma inflicted upon you on the job. This, however, has accumulative effects depending on how volatile one’s caseload already is. That is to say, how willing one is, as a colleague, to answer the phone when you feel already overwhelmed.

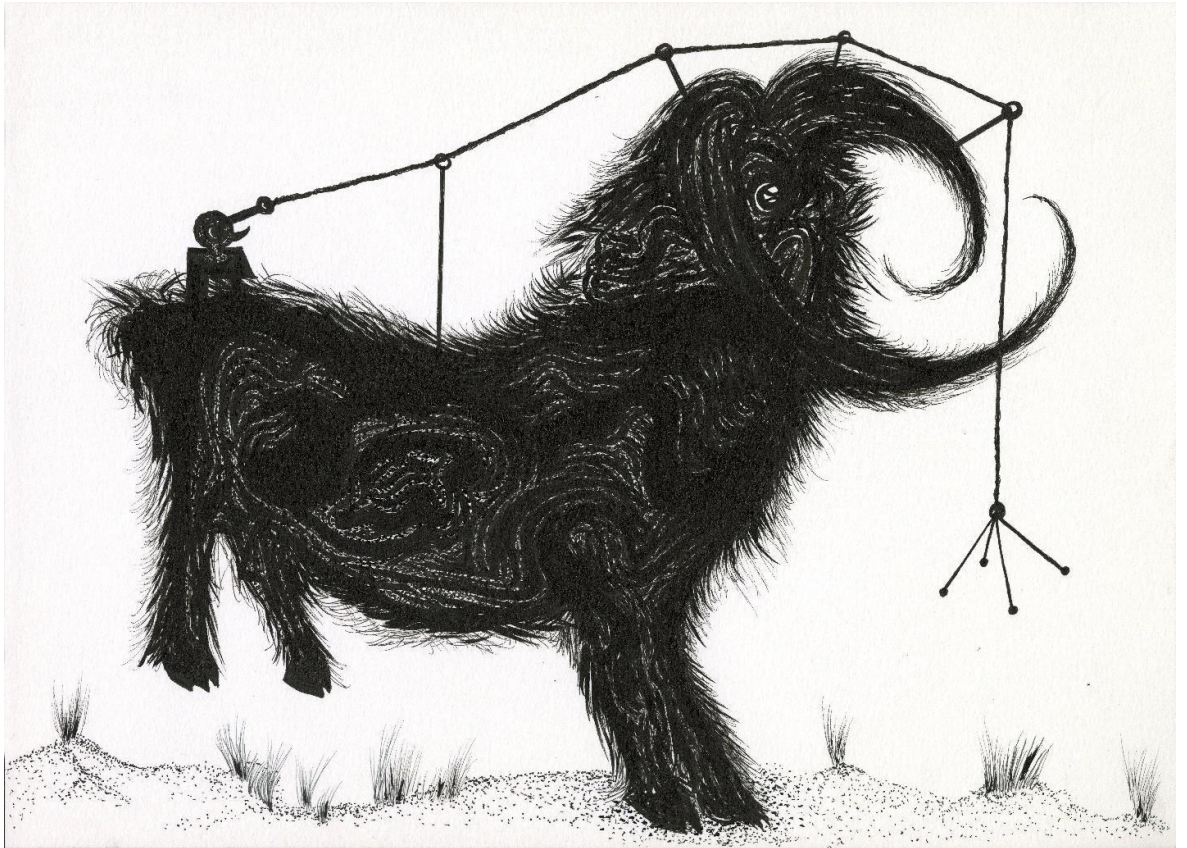


Fig. 45 - "Trembling String" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

The weight of the losses, though few, far outweigh the successes. Though I feel this and know it to be true, I'm not sure why it is so. If I look at what we've accomplished in this program, it is without a doubt that we have saved many lives.

The way that we allot time in a work week centres continuous productivity. What are you going to accomplish today? In the context of trauma, the passage of time maximises tension as it is operating between the eternal mind and the ephemeral body. We're trying to quantify our job into issues that are outside of time because they are in trauma time. It always feels Sisyphean.

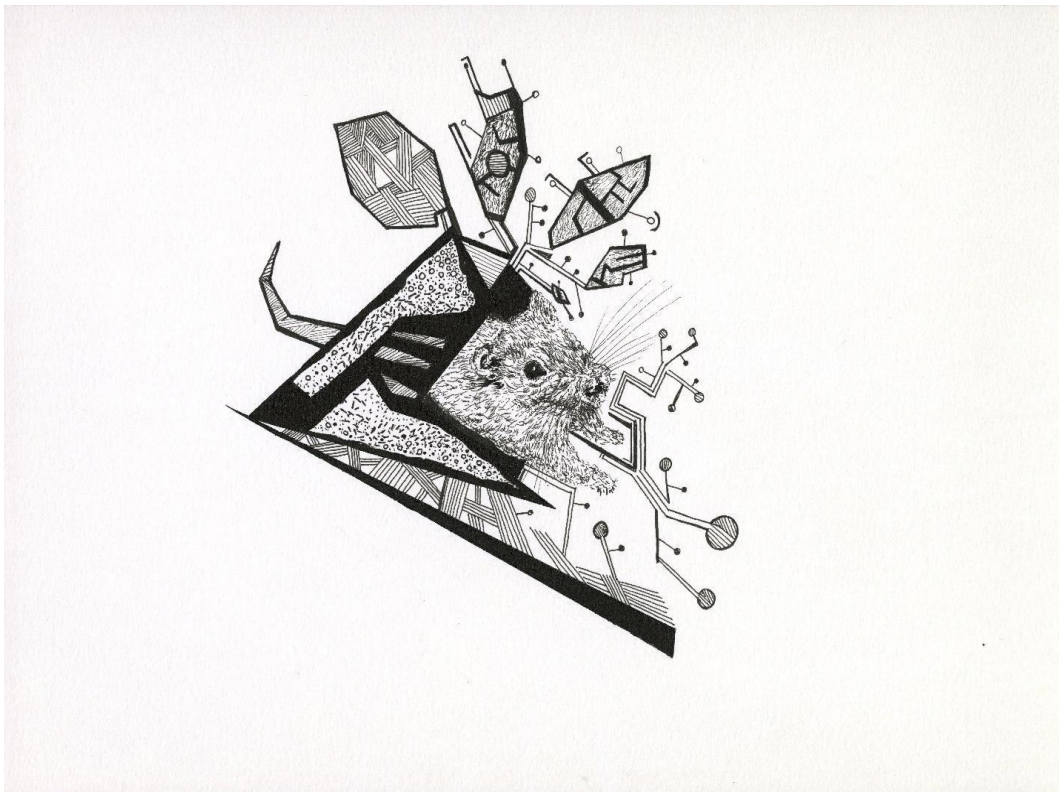


Fig. 46 - Sleepless - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

In my sleepless hours, I construct the schedule that will carry me through the day. The demands of facing trauma and crisis accumulate. I feel the effects of my seizure medication wearing off and the anxiety of the unknown growing. I feel a deep sense of isolation at this hour. What will today bring? There is no way to prepare, no way to avoid.

Memories are used—they call this “work experience”—to find a resolution to the problems you may possibly encounter. Each memory has a sensory record that is electrocuted into my being.

This idea of mindfulness—I’m not sure accounts for the vulnerability needed for this type of feeling. The random chaotic calls, the lack of support as you enter into the buildings where violence and poverty dwell. The structure of institutions, the repetitive traveling and sitting in an office, these do not exist for the caseworker who works in the field. We are outside of time and space carrying the institution’s expectations on our backs.

Each apartment building has space and energy. When I started this work, I remember other caseworkers explaining that there are moments when you feel that you shouldn’t

enter a building, and you should listen to this feeling. When I walk up to certain doors, I have felt the desperation of my clients seeping through the door. I now shore up and shift my structure to protect my senses until I knock on the door of someone's life.

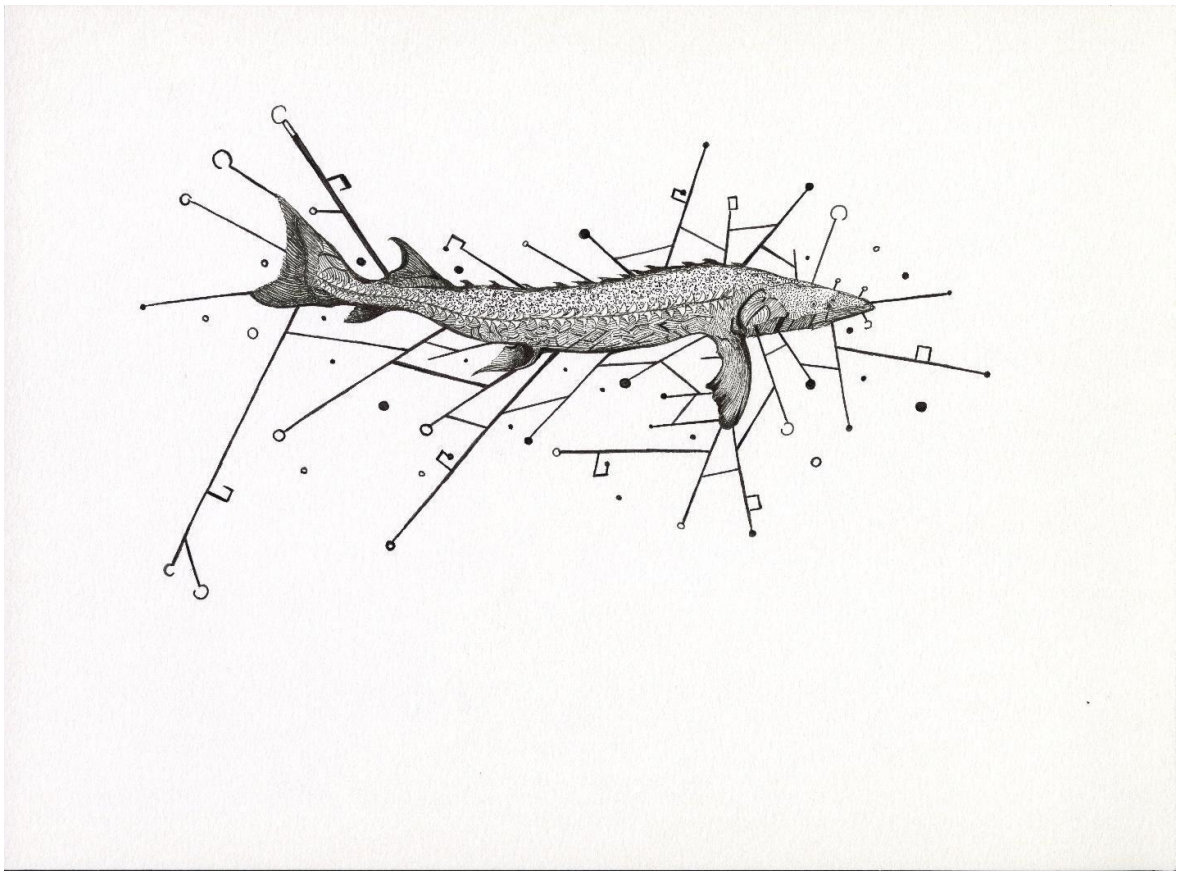


Fig. 47 - "Sturgeon time slip zone 8" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

Friday April 1st.

I found my way to the water in between seeing my clients. The sturgeon are here now. They found their way back up the seaway and have come to the lighthouse in Lachine to spawn. I often find myself at this pier. I've gone through a couple of complete burnouts and depression over the years, and the water always calls to me. Soon, I'll cast out into the depths and feel my 5 oz lead weight hit the riverbed, feel the current pull against my line. Sturgeon season will open soon. This dinosaur, this incredible animal, has existed without very much change over millions of years, always finding its way to adjust, adapt, and continue. I feel connected to the resilience of this fish. I remember Roy, who, along with the other fishermen on this beach, shared their knowledge with me, teaching me how to catch sturgeon. It allowed us to stand side-by-side together in a similar state of mind, alone but in a community, alone but united by a cause, alone together, waiting for this dinosaur to take the bait. We would give our fish to those who we knew had nothing to eat. Once, when I was on sick leave, I came back from the pier and told Carmella that I

had caught a fish and that today if we needed to eat, we wouldn't starve. I felt like I was of some use to the world, even though I was unable to work. As I write this on my break my client called to thank me for letting him know when his check would be deposited into their account. I hear the desperation in his voice, and somehow, we both accept that we have no control. The phone call ends with a sense of hope in the arrival of the funds this afternoon. Another client calls, and when I explain how the checks are delayed not necessarily because of the fiduciary, but because of a delay with the postal service, we talk about how stress builds for the entire community when these things happen. Friday is well known among everyone in human services as the day with the highest degree of anxiety. Today, the deposit delays compound this anxiety. One of my clients tells me that this seems like a bad April Fool's joke.

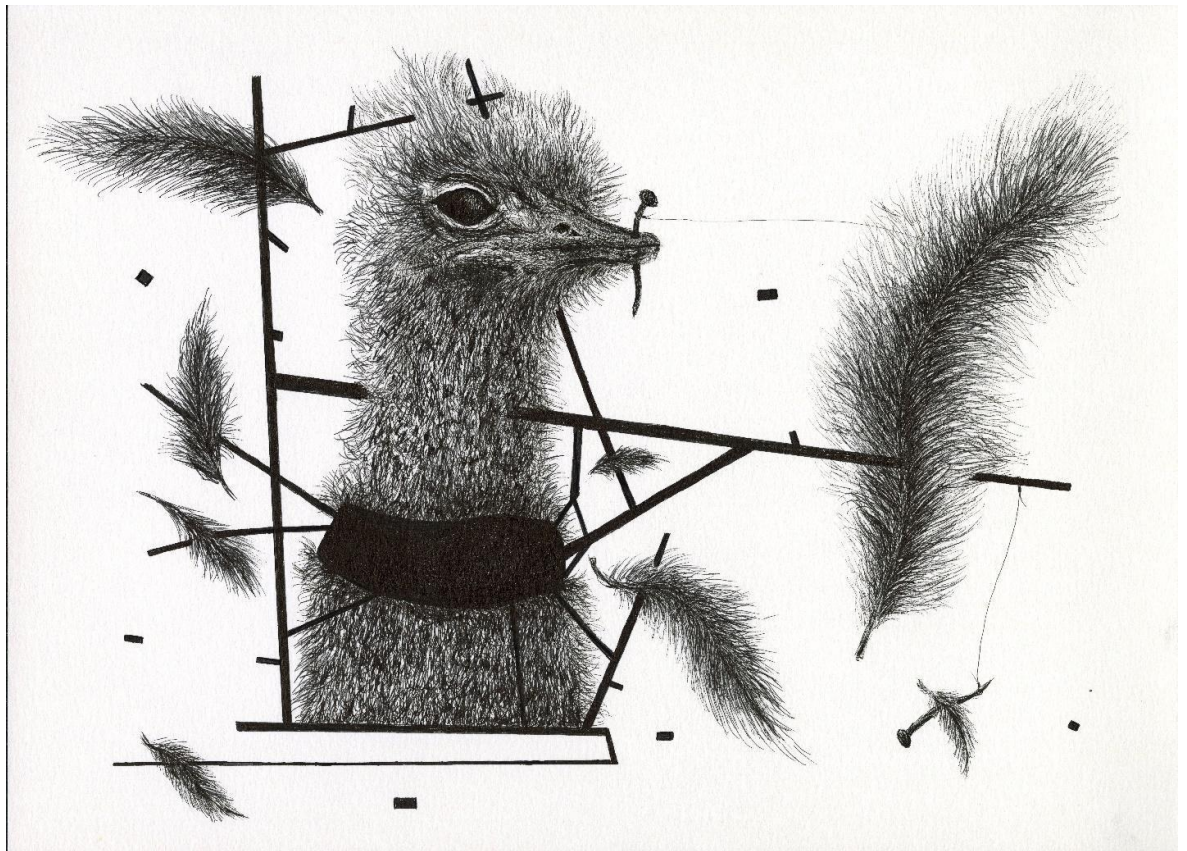


Fig. 48 - "Ostrich d/effect" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

Today I stood before a judge and advocated for a wanderer. I spoke through five layers of plexiglass, put in place to stop the spread of COVID. I told the judge that my client was a danger to himself, which is why I was asking for the court's intervention. The judge agreed and commended me for my dedication and finding a vocation. I was at once moved by this recognition, and at the same time wanted to quit. I went to the police station with my colleague to deliver the envelopes from the judge so the officers could find my client and bring him to the hospital for a psychiatric evaluation.

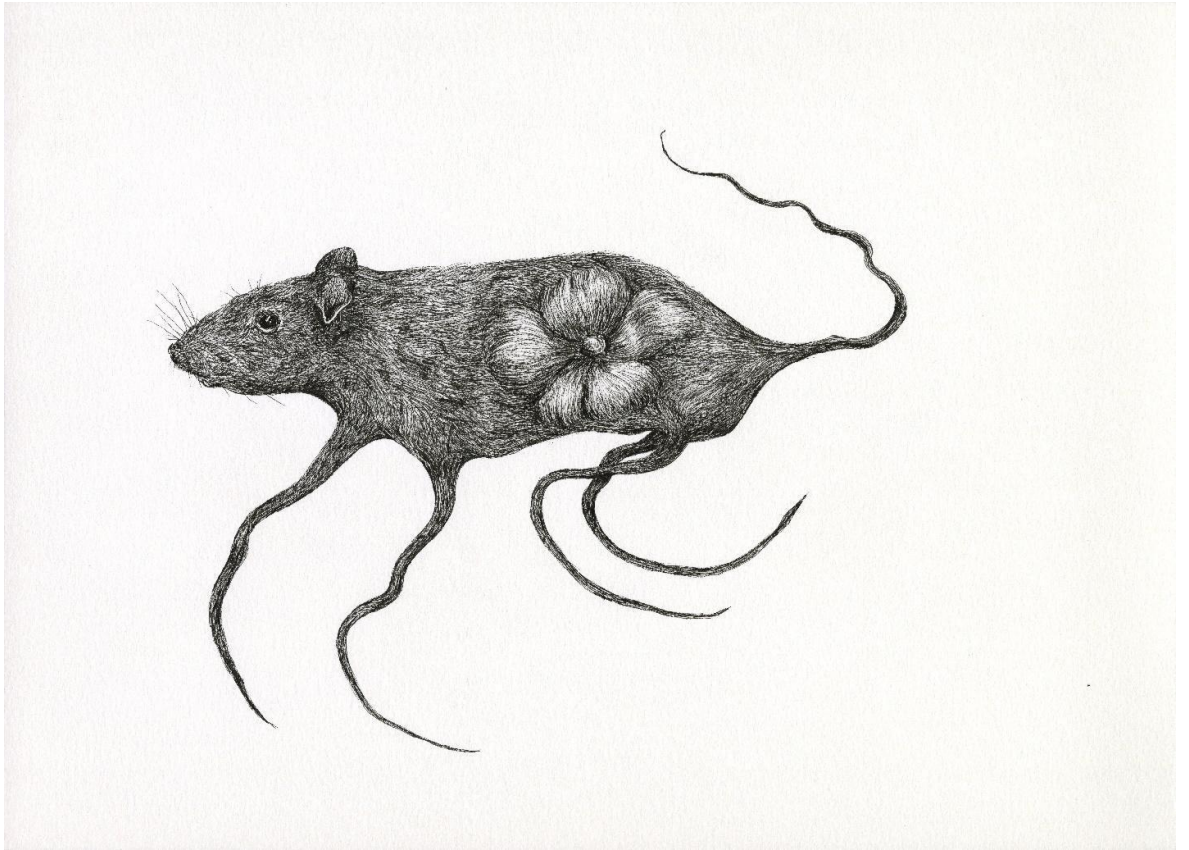


Fig. 49 - "Hell is repetition/Rat love" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

Hell is in the repetition of a thought bound by its resonance, unable to perceive anything new.

The past drowns the present—you see where this sentence ends.



Fig. 50 - "Paralysis" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series



Fig. 51 - "Migrant Birds" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

You often see little migrating bird carcasses around the base of skyscrapers early in the morning, before they are swept away. Flying to meet its reflection, it snaps its neck.

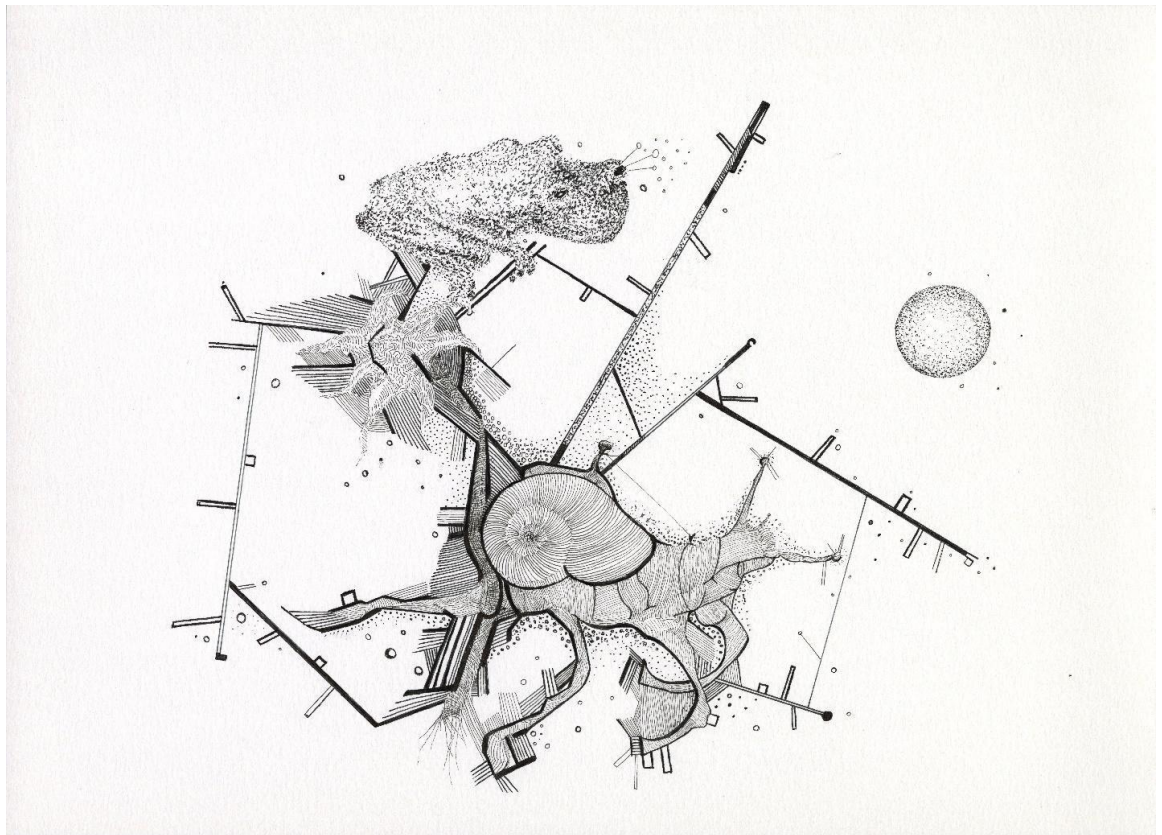


Fig. 52 - "Kit in the wind" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - Rusty Nail series

The subject is the object. I hold this thought gently. The conversation is hollow, but the social norms of conversation must be respected. *How are you feeling? How was your week? Ça va.* We both know this is a lie, but am I ready to hear his truth?

I'm coming to the end of a seven-year journey. I don't know where or what I will end up doing next, but the emotional toll of this work is no longer sustainable. Frontline workers remain in these jobs for many reasons. When I started work in this housing first initiative, I knew that I would dedicate myself for the 4 years the program was set to run. The last three years have been difficult (an understatement), and now I am one of 4 left from the original crew. There are presently 40 to 50 employees, and over 450 people have been housed through the program across the city.

This is what I focus on, that we were a part of saving all these lives and reducing harm to them. The problem of homelessness has outpaced us. It has grown exponentially in the decade I have been working in this field and is past the tipping point. However, I have

hope, even as I write this at 5:00 am as insomnia has overtaken me. Yesterday my client was released from the hospital back into the streets. How could I sleep well when I know he doesn't?

He is a kite in the wind.

Epilogue

Fig. 53 - "The Architect of Empathy" - ink drawing - 11"/15" - rusty nail series

Dear reader,

Through this thesis, I have attempted to explain the deep emotions, internal conflict, and some resolutions that have occurred over the last several years. I have tried to create a portrait of working in a field that has been, at moments, completely overwhelming, to the point of causing my body and emotional well-being much harm.

There have been many moments of deep despair, and I wish this was not so. There were many moments I sat crying in my car, or at home, sometimes in the shower so that Carmela wouldn't hear me and worry. Many frontline workers speak about being able to detach and separate from the work. That may be true when they say it, but I've seen all my colleagues break down or eventually leave. The reality, as I see it, is that no one who has the sensitivity or empathy necessary to work in this field is able to disconnect. I cannot.

In my experience as a frontline worker, people in human services who work within religious and para-church organisations are some of the most gentle and caring individuals you could find in any organisation. Really, in the age of prosperity gospel and the emphasis on “self-care”, individuals who decide to work in this field and expose themselves to this level of tragedy are remarkable, and in most cases, I would say they are not prepared or educated in the long-term psychological effects it will have on their well-being and their families.

In writing this I think back to my mother, who grew up in a wonderful, loving family. My grandfather was a minister who was persecuted for his faith and imprisoned by fascists, under suspicion that he was helping the Americans. There was suffering but also a great deal of joy in their home, thinking back to all the wonderful stories my mother told. Those days are long gone, and my mother and father have both passed away. I wonder why my mother believed so strongly that my brothers and I were to become ministers. Having seen what my brothers have gone through, and what I have felt as a lapsed Christian, it is a profession that I would not recommend to anyone. Poorly paid, no real quality of life, though the reward of an afterlife keeps everybody on track.

Really, why would any mother want her sons to spend their lives dealing with the pain of others? Chiara Maria Andrisani was an incredible woman. She was a woman that would give anything and everything that she had to help another human soul. I believe this extended to her sons—we were an extension of her faith. She had struggled to get pregnant and was told she couldn't have children, but after much prayer had three healthy boys. Often, we were told stories of the pain she endured during childbirth, and often did I see the pain she suffered in her marriage to my father. Her faith carried her through otherwise insurmountable pain and anguish. Even in moments sitting in the chemo ward, or on her deathbed, she reached out in compassion to those around her, caring more for the nurse than for her own pain and suffering.

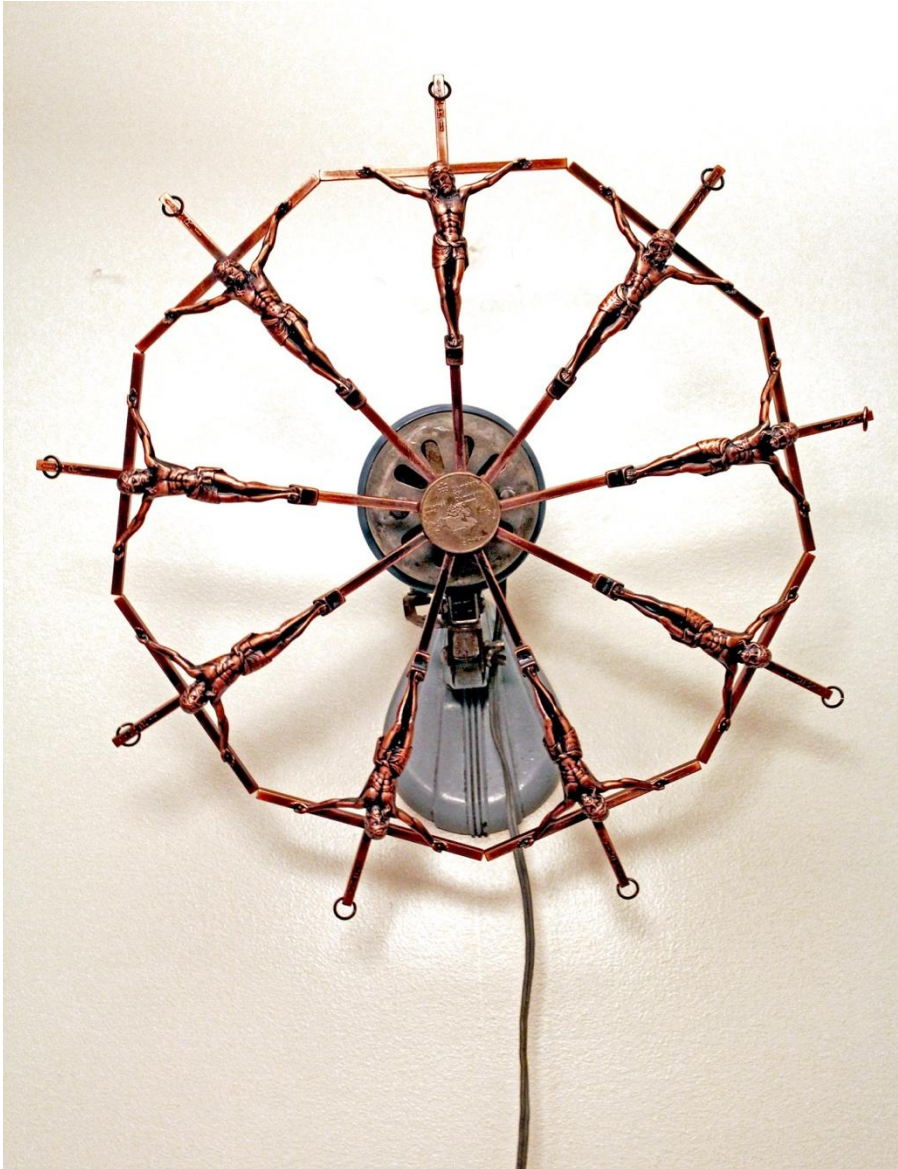


Fig. 54 – Crucifix Fan - mixed media (fan and crucifixes) - 12" x 13"

When I started this job I felt collective sadness, the feeling of deep regret that moved in waves of emotions through the air at the refuge. As I was able to help ease someone's suffering in some way it eased mine. Perhaps this was due to how empathy functions.

What I have found to be the most significant aspect of my life in human services has been understanding the necessity of doubt. When dealing with unfamiliar thoughts or new experiences there is no baseline to easily form a decision. There is no quantitative method that will prepare you for your senses being completely overwhelmed by the aftermath of violence, self-mutilation, or the slow accompaniment of someone wanting to punish themselves. There is no absolute or one truth; rather, each decision or idea expressed is subject to the context of the moment or the sequence in which the

conversation develops or unfolds. Doubt in this sense allows you the freedom and critical distance to engage in extremely complex conversations without the need for a recognizable conclusion or resolution.

Epistemic self-doubt developed as my operating system, though I was unaware of it initially. The instability of the clients, work, and lack of support leaves you to your own devices and the support of your colleagues as you push forward. In my case, the last several years have been a Cartesian approach of deconstructing long held beliefs, assumptions, and cognitive biases.

The necessity to question first and second order beliefs is essential in developing a level of conversation that does not impact both individuals. However, this does not occur easily for either; it requires a high level of introspection. The work changes you as it changes others, but not in a way that I could have expected or planned for.

Finally, I am left with one thought: that one must constantly, in an epistemological sense, move with self-doubt from certainty towards clarity. Certainty deprives us of a deeper understanding of ourselves and others, and it is within certainty that the worst biases reside. When we stop questioning the reasons behind our thoughts, we run the risk of falling into received prejudice and reactionary thinking. To strive towards clarity is to remain active in our pursuit of understanding, to try to see the world as it actually is, from where we could possibly see how it might be made better.

The sensory nature of rust leaves a stain and a distinct smell on your hand. The rusty nail reflects the passage of time and exposure to the elements, removed from its purpose in providing shelter and homes, once holding promise and wooden beams together. It now remains a huddled mass of iron entangled in a bucket. The rusty nail in my series of drawings and sculptures retains its meaning, a placeholder for what is seen but no longer of service.

Sincerely,

Eduardo Della Foresta

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