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"Lately, she's been seeing
things differently"

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Risky Objects: Illustrating Situated Body Image Experience

Beverley Irving-Edwards

Abstract

This autoethnographic PhD research utilises personal experience of eating disorders as a lens to critique broader culture. Poor body image will affect most Western women and girls; it is part of our everyday being. Western ideals have been used to construct race, sex, and class hierarchies, and continue to influence our cultural discourse. Although ideals shift over time, the white, thin ideal has been unwavering and othering.

Like the body, the home has also become idealised. Although the home can be experienced as a place of comfort and familiarity, struggles can hide in plain sight. Through object illustrations mimicking domestic ware, I invite the audience to sit at my childhood dinner table.

Illustration must communicate with an audience and through my object illustrations I aim to develop a methodology to engage groups of women in critical dialogue on body image. However, this topic risks causing distress, meaning a balance between sensitivity and honest testimony is needed. By illustrating open and fragmented narratives I try to create objects that engage audiences while avoiding potential retraumatisation. Each group provides feedback to inform the following round of this reflective and iterative practice. This article describes the first group engagement where I consider how emotion and affect can generate affective resonance.

Fig. 1: Beverley Irving-Edwards. *inclined to run*. 2022, iteration 1. Porcelain, glaze, ceramic decals, textile. Photo credit: Philip Arneill.

1. The Personal-Political Entanglement: Situating the Self Within the Culture and the Research

From the age of twelve, eating disorders consumed me for over a decade. I looked healthy, my family was not concerned, and I was unsure if I really had an illness at all. Now, as a 38-year-old illustrator-researcher, this experience has led me to want to connect with other women to problematise Western body image, while the material and aesthetics of my object illustrations situate my personal experience within that broader cultural context. This article concerns the first of three engagements where these objects perform as conversational prompts with different groups of women. Connecting with others from a "… specific, perspectival, and limited vantage point, can tell, teach, and put people into motion [by] creating space for a dialogue and debate that instigates and shapes social change" (Jones 206).

1.1 Western Culture: The Situated Body

I curate these dialogic engagements hoping they inspire future intergenerational conversations that underlie cultural ideals as the problem to be fixed, not our bodies. From the age of five, girls begin to internalise the fatphobia that permeates Western society (Grogan 137); body and appearance dissatisfaction can span our lifetime, eventually becoming compounded by our bodies feeling and looking old (Tiggemann 29). Many theories shed light on what shapes our body image. The media carries significant power, especially considering the rise in image dissemination enabled by the internet (Rose 10). Peers and parents are key influences (Keery et al. 237), with family having the potential to have a positive or negative impact (Kluck 8; Maor and Cwikel 11; Crocker 43-45; 157-164). Positive body talk can help; however, some of us believe that feeling happy with how we look is less socially acceptable as we are expected to be dissatisfied with our bodies and appearance (Lin et al. 113). Decades before the internet, John Berger reflected on the role of women in European nude paintings and drew parallels to contemporary advertising, suggesting that women learn to survey themselves (35-64). Objectification Theory expands on these ideas, illustrating how fragmenting women into body parts for decoration or titillation depletes mental health through an external, all-consuming self-awareness (Roberts and Fredrickson 173). The sociologist Sabrina Strings traces today's fatphobia back to the slave trade, the rise of Protestantism, and "racial categorization" or race science (63-165), when in an attempt to justify slavery, enslaved people were racialised, animalised, and defined as uncivil. Thinness became a marker for class, with weight on a white body suggesting a lack of willpower, intelligence, and morals. To be thin was to be good, better than, and closer to God (9-10). Even today, those considered slim and culturally attractive have better life prospects (Grogan 13-15). Despite a growing understanding that environment and genetics both contribute to the development of eating disorders, persistent false narratives can stop us from recognising that not only white women are affected, and most people who suffer are not underweight (Schaumberg et al. 432-433). Neurodivergence plays a part, too. ADHD children are 3.8 times more likely to develop eating disorders than their peers due to neurobiology and dopamine dysregulation (Schaumberg et al. 436; Villa et al. 265) and it is estimated that 20-35% of women with anorexia would meet the autism diagnostic criteria (Brede et al. 4281).

Exploring my own experience allows me to pull at multiple strands that can influence a person's view of their body. Our lived experiences may be unique, but individuals within a society will share a similar understanding of cultural meanings and practices (Hall 2).

1.2 Situated Identity: The Home and the Body

I am a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual woman. I am from Liverpool, England, UK, and I am working class. I was recently diagnosed, but always have been, neurodivergent. These dimensions of my identity exist at the same time, with bodies being the "physical sites where the relations of class, gender, race, sexuality and age come together and are embodied and practised" (Skeggs 82). Each factor influences how I move through society and experience culture. They also affect how I am seen, as "[c]lass is always coded through bodily dispositions: the body is the most ubiquitous signifier of class" (Skeggs 82). The French political scientist and activist Françoise Vergès proposes that a Decolonial Feminism "offers a multidimensional analysis of oppression and refuses to divide race, sexuality, and class into mutually exclusive categories" (20). Considering multidimensional differences highlights how being aware of who I am must also include being aware of who I am not and questioning what my viewpoint obscures (Vergès 19-20).

My body dissatisfaction and eating disorders manifested in my childhood home. Reflecting on this can bring about discomfort, even in myself, as the home has been idealised as a place of comfort and privacy as we invite people in and keep people out. It performs as both container and display: "'… as family relations, and gendered and class identities are negotiated, contested and transformed'. It is also the site where our most intense emotions are experienced, both negative and positive. 'The house, in this respect, simply is society, is history, is life itself in all its contradictions and confusions of pain and sorrow, joy and fulfilment'" (Gallagher 41, quoting Smyth and Croft 125).

The home can be an overlooked 'everyday landscape' for inquiry because of its familiarity and mundaneness, but it is precisely this that makes it so important. It actively engages with culture by "articulat[ing] and inform[ing] social meanings, values, relations, and practice" rather than merely reflecting it (Hanlon et al. 2). Gendered cultural discourse seeps into the home easier than fresh air through an

open window, through our televisions, the products we are sold, the internet on our phones, our interpersonal relationships, and domestic roles. How a family regards and discusses women's bodies can influence body image and I aim to highlight this by focusing on culturally influenced conversations around the dinner table.

2. The Illustrator

Illustration is "a 'working art' that visually communicates context to an audience" (Male 5). The field has expanded from a predominantly brief driven discipline to a space where authorial illustrators work inductively with the subject matter, "conjuring new metaphors, styles and forms with which to communicate, as appropriate to each project" (Black 290). An illustrator's position is subjective; how we think is as important as our visual outcomes (Gannon and Fauchon 1). Taking an inductive and reflective approach to the subject, I read literature from psychology and social sciences before 'corresponding' with materials and sketchbooks.

2.1 Methodology

British anthropologist Tim Ingold developed the 'correspondence' method as an art of inquiry by foregrounding the position of a craftsperson who thinks through making and generates knowledge through their engagement with materials and the world around them (6-7). Between the head, the hands, and the material, "flows and currents of sensory awareness [correspond] in which images and objects reciprocally take shape" (20). Rather than representing the world, correspondence creates an opening, an opportunity to respond and move forward, with the aim for all involved to understand more (fig. 2).
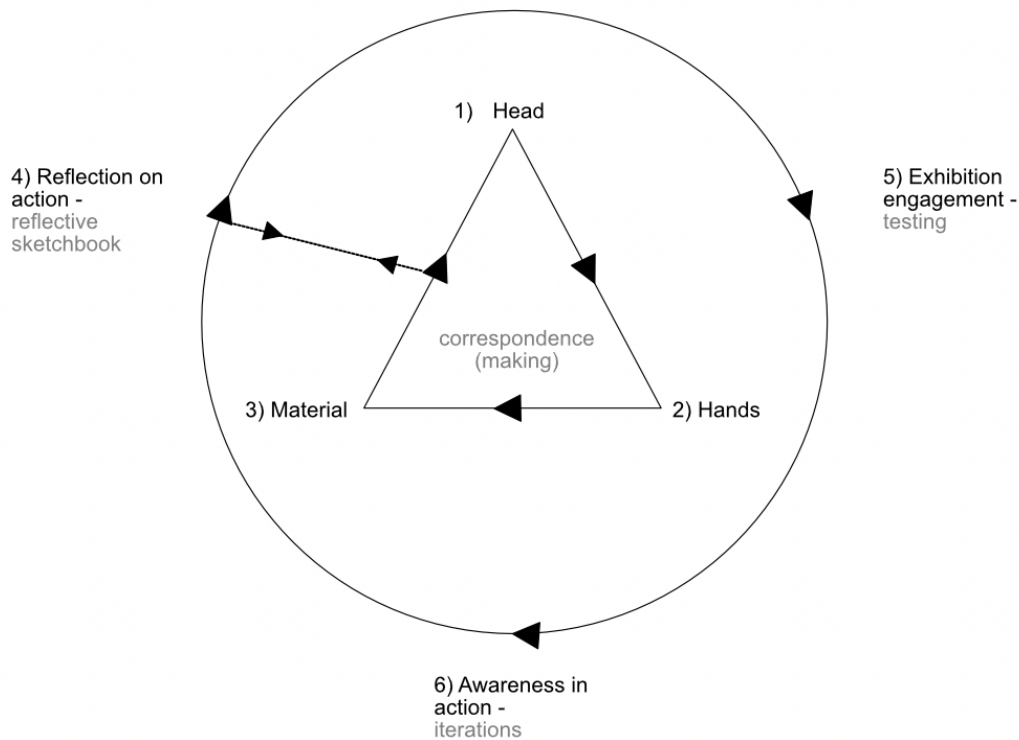
Fig. 2: Beverley Irving-Edwards. Methodology diagram. 2022.

1. My head holds the literature and memories.

2. My hands connect with the clay; its skin-like tactility registering the correspondence, preserving imperfections, adding a sense of reality to the form.

3. The material responds. I leave the direction open and adapt the narrative around accidents that occur during the making and firing processes.

4. I develop ideas for the surface of the objects, sometimes revisiting 1-3.

5. The object illustrations form part of the craftivist engagements. Craftivism will be discussed further in section 2.2.

6. I reflect on the critical conversations and analyse feedback using Content Analysis. This informs the next iterative cycle.

Regardless of my body image experience, as an illustrator engaging with psychology and sociology literature, I find myself looking for the person and their story. Understanding the limited narrative frameworks available to women (Woodiwiss 33), I believe publishing this methodology could benefit illustrators, women, and other disciplines. With illustration being subjective, and using my personal experience of a sensitive topic, an ethical, disciplinary, and feminist tension unfolds. How do I balance potentially causing harm with the harm that is facilitated by not doing this research?

The interpretive bricoleur understands how they cannot separate themselves and their experiences from their research, and nimbly tailor their methodologies to assemble a bricolage of multiple parts (Denzin and Lincoln 8). Using illustrative writing as a Critical Analytical Process (Fauchon 76), I tell the story of the research journey and reflect on the issue.

2.2 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a narrative-based qualitative research method within the social sciences that is both process and product. Autoethnographers use personal experience to engage with audiences by writing accessible first-person research texts and embrace the vulnerability of unpacking their experience within a cultural context (Ellis et al. 273-274). They build on existing knowledge, often with a social justice intention to challenge dominant power structures (Ellis et al.; Jones; Le Roux).

The intention and language of autoethnography are akin to illustration if images or objects are considered as text:

> [A] personal text can move writers and readers, subjects and objects, tellers and listeners into this space of dialogue, debate, and change. It does not speak alone. [It] is meant for more than one voice, for more than personal release and discovery, and for more than pleasures of the text. It is not a text alone. It is meant for public display, for an audience. (Jones 206)

Autoethnography was included in *Illustration Research Methods*, a book that offers a point of reference for illustrators to help recognise different terminologies and approaches within their methodologies as being inherent to illustration (Gannon and Fauchon 14–15; 36). I recognised I had been doing autoethnography already but was unaware of the terminology. Admittedly, my practice had lacked the necessary rigour and was less trauma-informed. The ethical review process requires researchers to consider the safety of themselves and all involved, implicated, and identifiable through association. Ethical autoethnography means questioning the roles of the people included and whether the story is about them or wider societal narratives, as is the case here. Despite anonymity, associates may be distressed by, or disagree with, the way they have been portrayed. Power dynamics must be considered, and, when possible, associates portrayed with empathy without reducing the author's experience. Autoethnography was included in *Illustration Research Methods*, a book that offers a point of reference for illustrators to help recognise different terminologies and approaches within their methodologies as being inherent to illustration (Gannon and Fauchon 14–15; 36).

2.3 Autoethnographic Illustration: A Way Forward

I felt it essential to illustrate body image experience in a three-dimensional form. Years of preoccupation needed to be rendered into physicality. Thinking beyond my experience, if most Western women and girls are affected at some point, these are bodies and minds en masse. Mental space needs to take up physical space rather than flattening it into a two-dimensional illustration to fit the page. Locating the home as the context where my preoccupation began, I made porcelain objects mimicking domestic ware, serving as a metaphor for the body and how we consume idealised messaging from society and within the home. During the sixteenth century European royals and the society's elite were obsessed with porcelain objects arriving from China (Finlay 142)[1]. Transatlantic trade and imports from the slave trade had influenced elite tastes and changed dining habits (170), and porcelain objects came to take on "great political and symbolic significance … conferr[ing] wealth and power on those who controlled their distribution" (162). Its whiteness, delicacy and elaborate decoration drew admiration and envy, standing out from the mundane earthenware in circulation and European nations competed to become the first to produce a

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[1] This is not the first-time porcelain arrived in Europe (Gutiérrez et al. 1213).

comparable material (143). By using porcelain, I situate my viewpoint as a white woman from a colonising country that is yet to fully reckon with its past. While acknowledging my position within this history, I draw attention to the role of whiteness within historical and contemporary body image discourses during the group engagements. Through the 'not quite right' form of the objects and the cut-and-paste surface decoration, I highlight my working-class identity by contradicting decorative and delicate expectations. Although my reasons for doing so may not be obvious, it gives an opportunity to unpack Western culture in a historical context.

The cups represent family members in conversation, memories of body image expectations and how women's bodies were talked about during my childhood. The table I ask the audience to sit at is curated as a collection of many utterings. We only ate together at the table for Christmas, usually sitting on the couch (I preferred the floor), with our plates on mismatched plastic trays while we watched TV. I play on our understanding of the expectation that families eat together around a table; the reality being that not all of us do.

By mimicking objects that we use to consume food and drink, I draw attention to how the body image messages we consume can affect our mental health and family relationships (fig. 3). Rather than illustrating bodies, the domestic ware provides a metaphor to help negotiate a safer engagement. Although autoethnographic texts narrate an experience, there is an ethical concern that illustrating explicit narratives could place the audience in an unsafe space. Disregarding narrative structure (Tamboukou 284), I cut fragments that speak to me from the book *The Cuckoo Clock*[2]. Birds feature regularly in my ideation, representing multiple body image influences. Afraid I might be too literal if I write, I compose open narratives, aiming for "[a]ffective resonance, [which] is a type of relational dynamics of affecting and being affected, characterized as a process of reciprocal modulation between interactants" (Mühlhoff 189) (fig. 4&5). During the making, cracks, breakages, and warping would appear, adding to the 'not quite right' appearance (fig. 6&7). Working with the flow of the material processes and the accidents, the object 'becomes' as I "bend it to an evolving purpose" (Ingold 25). The making carves a reflective space, a distance without the heaviness, enabling me to speak for the child that could not articulate what was happening.

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2 The book itself, published in 1931, has no real relevance to body image.

Fig. 3: Beverley Irving-Edwards. *things to talk about. I cannot tell you half. I'll never say again*. 2022, iteration 1. Porcelain, glaze, ceramic decals.
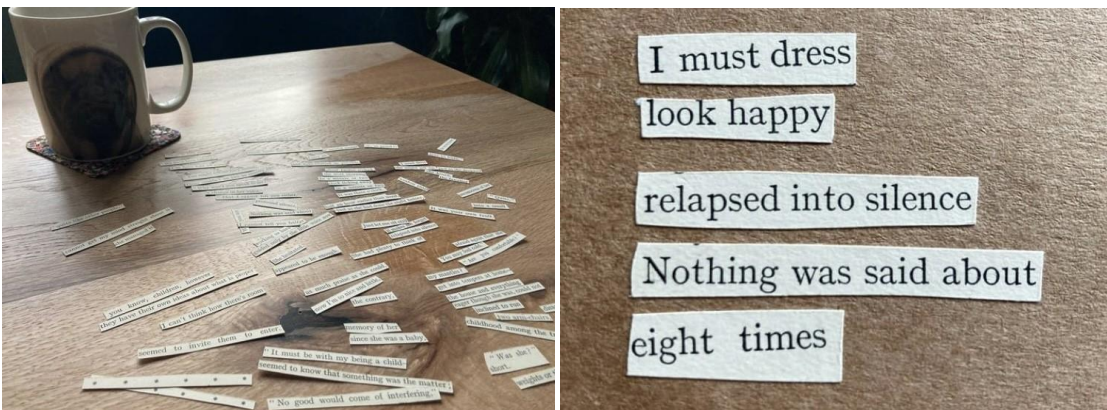

Fig. 4, 5: Beverley Irving-Edwards. Narrative process of cutting partial sentences from *The Cuckoo Clock* and piecing them together to offer an emotional undertone rather than a linear narrative. 2022.

Fig. 6: Beverley Irving-Edwards. Breakages were incorporated into the narrative. 2022.

Fig. 7: Beverley Irving-Edwards. *Just let me sit still. it makes me forget*. 2022, iteration 1. Porcelain, glaze, ceramic decals.

Alongside the domestic ware, I made earthenware object illustrations recognisable as children's book illustrations (fig. 8)[3]. I avoided illustrating the whole body and applied fragmented narratives, aiming for affective resonance rather than "communicat[ing] the 'secret' of [my] personal experience" (Bennett 7).

Fig. 8: Beverley Irving-Edwards. *the three birds*. 2022. Earthenware, underglaze, underglaze pencil, glaze, ceramic decals.

Art theorist Jill Bennett looks to trauma studies to understand how artwork registering trauma affects through exhibition engagement, explaining how common memory is used to tell stories of experience while sense memory recalls the physical and emotional effects of events. When creating artwork, Bennett suggests sense memory provides a "seeing truth" by working with the "thinking truth" of common

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[3] The text on the object illustration reads: "all the work that is done, from all directions, pass gently two or three times over her eyelids. May I open my eyes, please. I'll promise to believe anything you tell me. She repeated."

memory (26) to visualise a subjective experience. It "does not express inner trauma in such a way as to make it available to another to take on; rather, it feels a way to activate and realize connections" (45). However, this refers to non-narrative artwork.

Bennett describes different forms of audience responses. Where "crude empathy" sees the audience simplify and uncritically take on another's experience (111), "empathic unsettlement" is a balance of feeling for someone while recognising this experience is not yours (8). There are concerns with narrative-based art, such as film and its ability to invoke secondary trauma, albeit muted, through graphic imagery – and possibly requiring a different term than trauma (9). It is reiterated that although "there are fundamental problems with the notion that art has the capacity to transmit trauma," overidentifying with a victim risks not only potential secondary trauma but generating negative responses such as shame or guilt that can manifest as resentment (9), and narrative can increase that risk.

The illustrative relationship between text and image, and the autoethnographic intention to raise awareness through reading about an experience, may mean that my object illustrations simultaneously embody and narrate trauma. To avoid causing secondary trauma, I rely on fragmented narratives to provide an emotional tone that is just enough to connect with the audience. Affective resonance for illustrators is risky as there is a balance between engaging the audience and potential miscommunication. "[T]he intention of communicating with the viewer on an emotional level … isn't entirely misplaced, despite its accuracy being fraught with potholes such as individual interpretation leading somewhere else entirely" (Black 57) and this may subvert autoethnographic intention. If the object illustrations are misunderstood, will the audience be any more aware of the cultural influence on body image? Emotion alone does not equal affect.

This first iteration of object illustrations was included in a practice-based PhD exhibition where I asked for open feedback. Trigger warnings and a poetic introduction were hung outside the space to give context and the opportunity to avoid the work. Feedback suggested that the narrative was misunderstood but allowed for interpretation. The same objects were used for the first group engagement.

2.4 Craftivist Clay[4]: Using Illustration to Generate Critical Dialogue on a Personal-political Topic

Engaging people in a dialogic space is different to exhibition engagement. The group engagements are inspired by the Conversation Café method (2023) and craftivism, and through illustration I aim to design a methodology for critically discussing body image for others to adapt and build upon. Through making, craftivism brings people together to critically discuss sociopolitical issues that affect them. With roots in civil rights and feminism, craftivism can empower through education, tools and peer-to-peer connections, impacting individual and collective quality of life through participation (Garber 53-58). Ratto and Boler (qtd. in Melo 62) use the term 'DIY citizenship' to describe how individuals and communities partake in restorying[5] their experiences and environments by creatively questioning power structures.

Throughout my research I held two in-person engagements with undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Ulster University's Belfast campus, Northern Ireland, holding another online with participants of the Ulster Museum's arts and wellbeing group[6].

The postgraduate group each gave informed consent and confirmed they have never had eating disorder or body dysmorphia diagnoses. The sessions were supported by an art psychotherapist and information from the University's wellbeing services and Eating Disorders Association Northern Ireland was provided; both offered post-session support if needed. I began with a safeguarding statement asking to avoid making any personal body image disclosures and reiterated that although the autoethnographic illustrations use personal experience, this is to generate critical discussion on cultural influences. I reminded the group that this session was not therapy. Participants were asked to bring an object to the table that represents body image to them, and this helped start our conversation. Some brought tweezers,

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[4] I expect to change the name of the engagements in my thesis submission.

[5] Restorying is a term used across disciplines including narrative inquiry, education, and narrative therapy where an individual will re-tell a story of experience. The experience will be explored for importance, narrative elements, additional context and then reframed.

[6] Ulster Museum's Reimagine Remake Replay programme included a weekly online arts and wellbeing workshop during the Covid-19 pandemic. I attended these sessions for over a year to get to know the group and their art therapist. It was agreed that my research aligned with the programme's values, and I designed a six-week series for this particular group. Due to funding issues, the arrangement was cancelled, and I redesigned my research. The group kept in touch and were able to partake in this reduced capacity and outside of the museum arrangement.

slimming pants, and gossip magazines. Omitting personal experiences proved difficult and contradictory at times, as our lives are entangled with culture and the line between personal and political is not clearly defined. It required a gentle balance between not silencing but moving the conversation gently back to the broader picture. After our conversations, I spoke about my aesthetic decisions in relation to the racial origins of fatphobia and the multidimensionality of my identity, without elaborating on my experience beyond acknowledging that it informs the work. Without asking for information on class, disability, and sexuality, I could only identify the group as white, and of varying ages. Although reflective of the student demographic, there are questions around barriers to spaces, and who feels comfortable engaging in this research.

I felt less vulnerable showing the work in this situation, a dialogic space, compared to the exhibition. Here I sat around a table with a group of women who told stories through recognisable objects; all, apart from one woman who brought a magnet that helps alleviate menopausal symptoms. Nobody knew what this useful object was, yet we recognised the objects that influence how we look. The feedback I collected focused on understanding how my object illustrations communicate, and the difference between the reception of the three-dimensional object to the two-dimensional version printed on a page. After our conversation, the group made object illustrations in response (fig. 9 and 10).

Fig. 9: Participant object illustration. 2022. Photograph: Beverley Irving-Edwards.

Fig. 10: Participant object illustration. 2022. Photograph: Beverley Irving-Edwards.

Participant feedback showed that my object illustrations connected through open narratives. Even so, only four participants explicitly mentioned girlhood, conversations, or family. Although asked not to elaborate, some wrote personal snapshots of peer influence, fatphobia in the media, societal pressures, and feeling inadequate; some connecting with broken fragments that I had not considered as objects in their own right. Unable to ask why or how the narrative openness resonated with the women, I am left with questions. If the intended narrative of family body image dialogue is not (mostly) understood, but its elusiveness enabled connection, have the object illustrations communicated within the dialogic space? Within an exhibition, could effective resonance on this topic be riskier with the potential to become too personal, missing the broader cultural context required of autoethnography?

Bennett refers to philosopher Gilles Deleuze's "encountered sign" to argue that feeling, and being impelled to inquire and interpret, is a catalyst towards critical thinking (7). The object illustrations appear to have done this to some degree, as being able to hold the object enabled participants to explore, whereas the flat page kept aspects hidden. Still, there are contradictions, or compromises, between autoethnographic illustration and art embodying trauma. On one hand, I "own" my experience (Bennett 6), but the specifics of this experience are left out to avoid causing harm. Without narrating any owned experience, does this potentially enable overidentification as the experience is then generalised and common to most women? The everydayness of the topic and narrative openness may not provide enough owned experience for empathic unsettlement.

I initially believed this iteration failed as the narrative intention was misunderstood. Reflecting on both settings, I see this as inevitable but also in need of reframing. Being reminded that illustration is relational, there needs to be considered recontextualization. Perhaps, in an exhibition space, adding alternative texts or objects to ground the narrative openness within the cultural context would determine the work as autoethnography rather than trauma(tising) art. Within the dialogic space, talking about the material and aesthetic choices positioned the situated personal experience within a historical and contemporary cultural context. The participants all agreed this was a benefit.

3. Moving Forward

Each participant reported feeling safe and supported during the engagement, however, there are many variables going forward. The safety of an environment can be affected by the physical space, the facilitator, art therapist, and group dynamics. Conversations and reactions are not predictable as everyone brings their own history, and the next engagements involve different groups with different object illustrations. After discussing this iteration with my supervisors, we agreed that the narrative was too ambiguous, but creating an explicit narrative around the childhood home is too high risk, potentially causing participants to reflect on their personal worlds. The following iteration will be more explicit with a focus on society.

Ethical practice extends to presentations and publications. I must signpost the context and give people the opportunity to bypass the work. Considering the normalising of poor body image, it may even be why women want to engage. Sometimes we misunderstand that we can look healthy or be overweight and still be very unwell (Schaumberg et al. 433): there is not a clearly drawn line delineating disordered territory. Susan Bordo, professor of Gender and Women's Studies, posits that most Western women could be considered disordered when ideals equate self-worth, and therefore "eating disorders, far from being 'bizarre' and anomalous, are utterly continuous with … the experience of being female in this [the Western] culture" (Bordo 57).

Through illustrating my experience, I show how cultural narratives can influence us, while respecting women's individual experiences. In some regards we may similarly understand and practise Western culture, but our multidimensional identities mean we can have vastly different realities.

Understanding how illustrating sensitive topics or traumatic experiences may affect or harm people allows us to reflect on audience connection and narrative. By distinguishing between what is an understandable and expected response to distressing or sensitive subject matter, such as discomfort, and what is potentially harmful, it may be necessary to approach the work differently rather than not do it at all. A reaction can only be expected when the illustrator-researcher acknowledges the potential risk and gives audiences prior context so they can choose to engage or not. Again, how do I balance the risk of causing harm with the harm that is facilitated by not doing this research? It is not a question that can necessarily be answered, but an awareness of potential harm is key.

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