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MEMORY ON CLOTH

Tracy Kennedy

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Figure 1. Tracy Kennedy,  
*Pain*, 2020,  
Dye & Surface Manipulation  
on polyester.

**Pain**

It comes without warning, mostly  
Holding joints coldly  
Weak in its intent  
Embarrassing itself with its lack of care  
Taking its toll on body and mind  
Lying low under the covers. <sup>1</sup>

*Memory on Cloth* is part of a wider body of textile artwork, incorporating analogue and digital textile techniques that create a 'topography of cloth', mapping a personal journey of chronic pain and sensory loss. *The Sensory Topography of Cloth: Soft Armour and Worn Stories*<sup>2</sup> is the title of a final MVA project undertaken at the Dunedin School of Art, exploring the notion of responding to a chronic pain disorder; Fibromyalgia, via the medium of textile surface manipulation. Cloth is transformed through folding, dye, and heat, to emulate a personal landscape, intended to evoke an emotional response in the viewer, while application of stitch further distorts the surface. An intuitive process emerging from a decade's long textile practice,

and reflectively named 'controlled serendipity', informs the surface tension. Inspired by the idea of "hybrid craft", a phrase coined by textile artist Cathy Treadaway<sup>3</sup> cloth manipulated by hand is further digitally enhanced for print. Rediscovering a penchant for prose, as an unexpected reaction to the manipulated cloth, a further layer of meaning emerges. The cloth takes on a life of its own, obscuring and exposing a deeply personal narrative.

Combining storytelling and visual art through layers of text and image, multi-media artist Francis Stark evokes similar feelings of loss and pain from a personal feminist viewpoint<sup>4</sup>. Working within western feminist frameworks, I too explore perspectives of experiencing pain within the feminine body. Chronic pain in the body can often be linked to emotional and physical abuse, a lack of control and choice over one's own body. The pressure to conform to societal expectations and the silhouettes of feminine beauty can exacerbate symptoms related to negative body image. Links to feminist intersectional politics and the sartorial were explored, including the representation of dress as a symbol for place and culture in the paintings of Frida Kahlo.<sup>5</sup> The work of artist Barbara Graf presented exploration of form, movement, and sensation through textile manipulation, with a focus on altered sensation caused by a diagnosis of a chronic illness, Multiple Sclerosis.<sup>6</sup> My focus is on the creation of cloth that reflects these struggles, evokes meaning and presents a visual narrative alongside storytelling.

Digital manipulation further distorts the origins of the work through enlarged, pixelated imagery digitally printed onto fabric and suspended in space. This magnified imagery plays with the idea of pain at a cellular level within the body, while the analogue to digital transformation displaces cloth from a customary worn material to the wall of the gallery.



Figure 2. Tracy Kennedy, *Topography of Cloth*, 2021, exhibition installation. Digital print on polyester.



Figure 3. Tracy Kennedy, *Sartorial Longing*, 2020, (detail)  
Dye & Surface Manipulation  
on Polyester:

### Sartorial Longing

A square, a rectangle  
Same, same  
Worn as statement  
Protection, protest  
Longing to say something new.<sup>7</sup>

As the cloth is wrapped around the hand and exposed within a photocopier, different images emerge, a more obvious connection to the body, to the medical, to the human condition. A personal snapshot of struggle focussed on the point of most discomfort.

Through exploration of a range of media a piece of cloth is elevated from a flat, lifeless weave to a topographical surface, a holder of memory, and an enabler for storytelling, representing the lived experience of a chronic pain syndrome. Textile surface manipulation, dye, stitch, and digital print are juxtaposed and layered within a 3D and 2D landscape, jointly exhibited on and off the body.

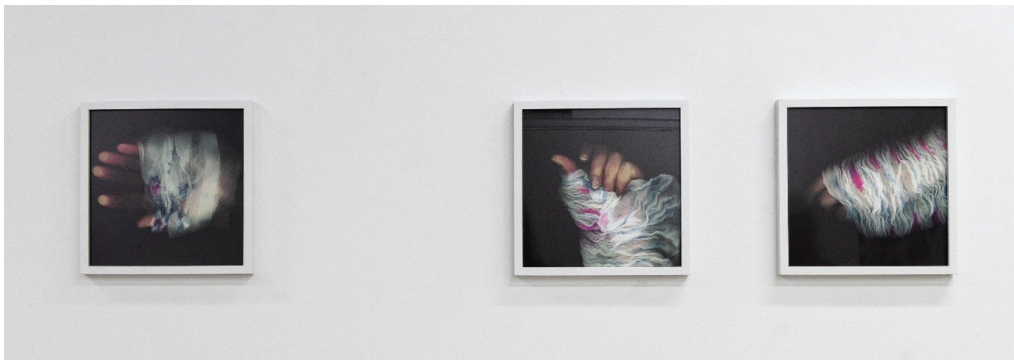


Figure 4. Tracy Kennedy, *Topography of Cloth*, 2021, exhibition installation. Digital print on paper.

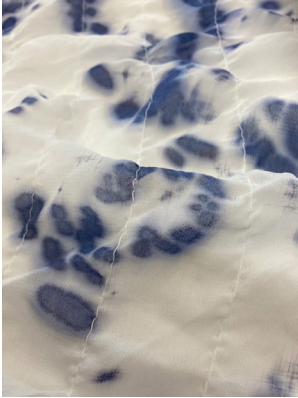


Figure 5. Tracy Kennedy,  
*Brain Fog*, 2020,  
Dye & Surface Manipulation  
on Polyester:

### Brain Fog

There are no words coming,  
Fragments of thought  
Disturbed cotton wool fight  
Tired effort  
Sensory overload.<sup>8</sup>

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- 1 Tracy Kennedy, "Pain," 2020.
- 2 Tracy Kennedy, "The Sensory Topography of Cloth: Soft Armour and Worn Stories.", Master's Thesis, Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, 2021.
- 3 Cathy Treadaway, "Printed Textiles," in *Crafting Textiles in the Digital Age*: edited by Nithikul Nimkulrat, Faith Kane, Kerry Walton, (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) 17-33.
- 4 Francis Stark and Ali Subotnick, (ed) "UH-OH Frances Stark 1991-2015." (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, University of California, 2015).
- 5 (Frida Kahlo.org, n.d.) *Frida Kahlo Paintings, Biography quotes* <https://www.fridakahlo.org/marxism-will-give-health-to-the-sick.jsp>
- 6 Barbara Graf, "Corporeal Explorations: From Embodiments of Bodily Expressions to Visual Recordings of Physical Sensations", *Scope (Art & Design)* 20, (2020): 19-30 [https://www.thescope.org/assets/scopes/3\\_SCOPE\\_20\\_Graf.pdf](https://www.thescope.org/assets/scopes/3_SCOPE_20_Graf.pdf)
- 7 Tracy Kennedy, "Sartorial Longing," 2020.
- 8 Tracy Kennedy, "Brain Fog," 2020.