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Mackenzie Hayward-Williams

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Mackenzie Hayward-Williams

My work has always been about catharsis, informed by trauma, whether I realised it or not. Making has given me ways to describe my feelings with my hands. I spent much of my childhood drawing or cutting up fabric and paper, creating collages, faces, paper dolls and characters, made up or based on movies or books I read—people who lived in worlds far outside of my own. Making is a helpful tool in connecting myself to the world a little better.

While studying at Dunedin School of Art (DSA), I created textile works deeply informed by childhood trauma, from Swanndri-esque plaid textile guns describing my experiences growing up as a queer person in Southland, to a roughly human-sized puppet hung from the ceiling for my undergraduate DSA *Site* exhibition, which worked through sexual trauma I experienced during my teenage years. Despite heavy themes, both my art making and art writing use humour. It is a natural healing process to try and create lightness out of darkness. It is also a good deflection tactic. But if a well-placed joke can hide several emotions, it is not very good at hiding physical sickness.

This article consolidates the ideas and workings behind my BVA Honours project, *Poor Sick Clown*, exhibited at DSA's *Site* 2025. Three 'life-sized' clown sculptures embody feelings of isolation and pain, navigating spaces between naively perceived 'rock bottoms' and intangible distant futures, where I have no vices and I am completely healed. The work centres on a personal narrative of neurodiversity and chronic illness, exploring the creation of self and coping as a young person through layered complexities. I lean into feelings of foolishness and caricature, so I don't feel so ashamed by them—ashamed of being the clown, the butt of the joke.



Figure 1. *Poor Sick Clown*. From left to right: *I'm Getting There, Don't Worry*, *I'm Fine This Happens All The Time* and *Bending Over Backwards*.



Figure 2. *Don't Worry, I'm Fine This Happens All The Time*.

Don't Worry, I'm Fine This Happens All The Time (Fig. 2) is one of the three sculptures specifically influenced by my personal experiences with AUDHD and with Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS).[1] As explained to me, by medical professionals and Google, POTS is a form of dysautonomia which causes increased heart rate when standing, leading to dizziness, fatigue, sudden blindness and fainting due to insufficient blood flow to the brain. Fun! Equally fun to explain to bystanders. Hence, the reuse of the title.

The project explores these experiences with equal parts levity and severity. I am interested particularly in the action of disregarding ourselves and our health in the name of upholding unreciprocated relationships; and in keeping up appearances and keeping in touch with a sense of community, in any sphere, as an unwell person. There is as much humour in the lengths my friends and I go to, in our attempts to assimilate into the world and in spaces that are not built for people with disabilities, as there is pain. Trying to integrate myself fully into these spaces has only made me feel ridiculous, so that is what I am. Ridiculous, that is the feedback loop. But it also makes me laugh at these spaces that exclude so many. What a loss.

Not all my experiences are singular to me; many are shared universally by those failed by systems rooted in colonialism, racism, capitalism, patriarchy, classism and ableism, which are intertwined. Where do you start to participate in what you do not take seriously, and what in return does not take you seriously?

Jack Halberstam argues in his book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, that failure can be a useful and productive critique of capitalism and heteronormativity.

Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the



Figure 3. Original sketch of an angry clown face.

world. There is much to be learned from what is happening at the margins, at the edges, in those places where people who do not conform to the dominant logics of power, discipline, order, and efficiency find themselves living and thriving. Failure, in short, sometimes offers more creative solutions to problems than success, and this is particularly true for those whose success has never been legitimated.[2]

My work encourages the rejection of individualism and the dismantling of traditional ideas of success, wealth accumulation, advancement of career, marriage and having children. These are metrics that leave many people on the sidelines of so-called 'success.' Re-evaluating my needs and motivations, accepting limitations and building routines that allow me to live comfortably have been the hardest lessons of my life thus far. It has cost me opportunities and relationships, but overall, I feel closer to health. Ritalin also helps.[3]

It has been almost like a dance or circus act between keeping oneself alive and feeling as if one is slowly killing oneself, leaving one feeling very foolish, like when the clown is kicked around for laughs. A similar scene is set in examples used by cultural theorist and scholar Sianne Ngai in her book *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, in which she offers theory and context behind some niches we use to process the "hyper-commodified, over-saturated world of late capitalism."[4]

"The Zany Science" is the title of the chapter devoted to a style of comedy in art and literature, which in contrast to irony indulges in light-hearted, silly or goofy behaviour.[5] These works often critique social norms or contain hidden, more nuanced subject matter and themes. A common trope seen within these comedies is the protagonists being pushed to their limits; the humour lies in their struggles to combat and adapt, their ineptness. The author refers to comedian and actor Lucille Ball's character in the 1950s American comedy *I Love Lucy*. The viewer watches housewife Lucy Ricardo's "doggedly persistent, comically strenuous efforts to break into the artistic and cultural production she reverently calls 'showbiz.'"[6] The challenges Lucy faces include quickly picking up new skills, such as "French or ballet, or … taking a temporary job involving some kind of affective service work: selling and unselling salad dressing on television, babysitting and managing child talent, working as a magician's assistant." Each of these temporary occupations requires Lucy to put on a costume and act like someone else. Ngai specifically references the Episode "Ricky Needs an Agent" as a prime example of 'zany.'[7] Lucy, "clad in a power suit and glasses," masquerades as her husband Ricky's agent in order to pressure MGM studios—with which he already has an ambiguous job contract—to let him make a movie.[8] To arouse interest in Ricky, she lies and brags about an offer of a Broadway musical so convincingly that MGM releases Ricky from his ambiguous job so he can pursue it. For the remainder of the episode, she commits herself to playing herself, Ricky's wife, Lucy Ricardo, to convince MGM of the existence of a crazy woman impersonating Ricky's agent to get him rehired.

It is the incompetence of Ball's character that is so funny, exemplified, according to Ngai, in a scene from the ballet episode in which Lucy gets her leg stuck in the bar.[9] Lucy Ricardo is comical because she fails to be versatile, as required by the roles she assumes in the pursuit of paid work—"an unremitting succession that in turn seems to be a formal echo of the multiple roles already demanded by the informal or unpaid job of housewife and mother (cook, teacher, chauffeur, cleaner etc)."[10] Yet it is her incompetence in both spheres—her proposed lack of talent and utter inflexibility—that makes her so entertaining, not her persistence or undeterred can-do spirit.

Throughout history, the role of a clown has been taken by those marginalised in some way, whether through disability, race or class.[11] Court jesters and fools, freaks and rodeo or circus clowns, are permitted to mock hierarchies or the status quo, so long as it is funny. Clowns are performers; their role is to entertain. But this character and role are separate from the self or at least should be. An interesting juxtaposition arises when the clown cannot perform, a scenario evident in the installations of Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone. In *Vocabulary of Solitude* (2014–2016),[12] clowns fill a room, more than a dozen sitting or lying motionless.

If There were Anywhere but Desert, Friday (2002), is one of a seven-part series in which Rondinone represents each day of the week with an individual immobile figure, deprived of their freedom and capacity for fulfilling the role of trickster or fool.[13] Rondinone has described the 'failure' of his clowns:

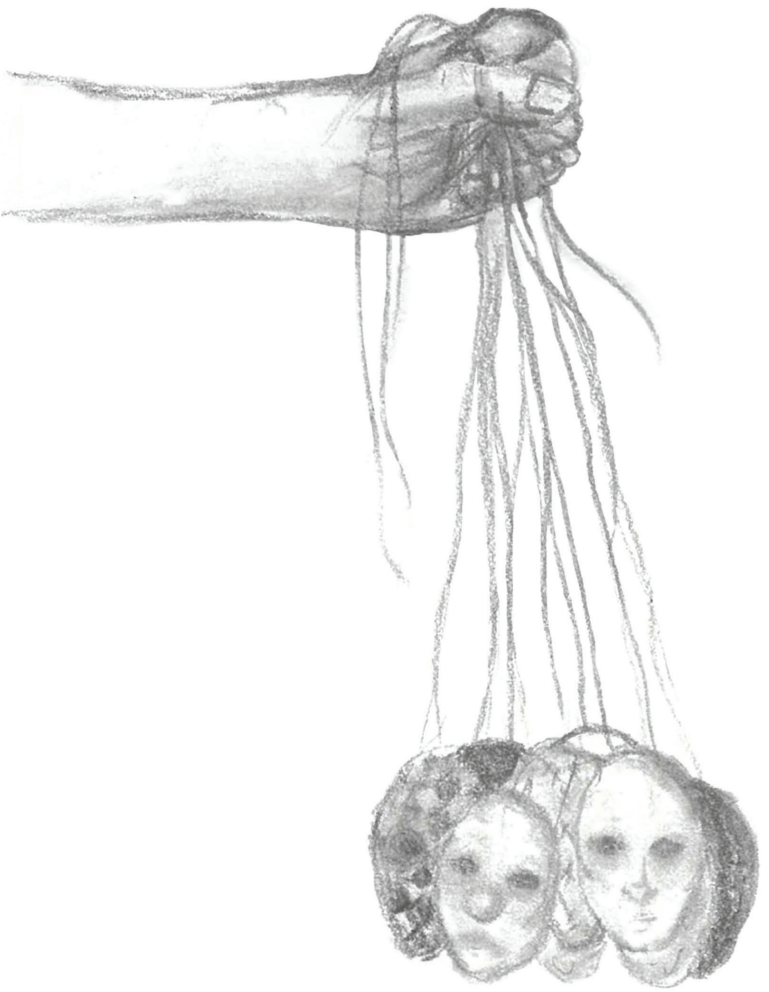


Figure 4. Original sketch of a hand grasping many masks.

The clown is an invention of high nobility to push away boredom and melancholy out of the court. At the same time, it functions as a substitute: it has freedom of speech his masters don't have. On the other hand, my clowns do not move. They only sit or lie down, do not laugh, do not say either good day or good night. By its absence of demonstration and its disinterest in the outside world, the character of the clown is possibly a self-portrait. He leads to a melancholy empty of meaning, which perpetuates itself in the vacuity of a world without irony.[14]

Yet each of Rondinone's clowns is still rich with colour and pattern, with exaggerated tulle collars, performatively dressed in contrast to the stark spaces they inhabit. I enjoy this aspect of his work: while each clown lies dormant, it may at some point rise. Realistically, as much as I jest, there are some things I must take seriously. For example: my health, therapy, the current state of the world. With clown figures or characters, I can live out a fantasy where everything is a joke. Meanwhile, it is hard not to feel like the fool or the comedic relief plagued by misfortunes. So why not lean into it? If I were to take things too seriously, where would I stop? If I am going to struggle to live up to societal measures of success, why not make a performance of it all? These figures can safely stand in this in-between and exist where I cannot.

Clowns connect all my ideas and feelings, particularly with neurodiversity and with mask-making having already being a part of my work. Clowns are adorned with permanent, painted expressions despite tribulations. 'Masking' is a term used to describe the conscious or unconscious strategies used by those who are neurodiverse to hide, camouflage or compensate for their autistic traits in social interactions and settings.[15] This behaviour suppresses both mental and physical feelings, allowing the individual to remain in certain environments despite it feeling unnatural, uncomfortable or painful. Masking can feel to me like creating different versions of myself to assimilate into different spaces. This process leaves me exhausted, and, ironically, it is a process that I do not feel is very convincing.

Creating the masks tapped into the deepest part of my practice throughout my time at DSA: the relationship between the visual language of stitching and patchwork collage, and the real but invisible act of healing or creating new versions of oneself to overcome hardship. Using scrap material to create faces and parts of the body, I felt as if I was stitching myself back together, often haphazardly or messily, but sometimes neatly and with care. Sometimes the stitches pulled too tight, some were too loose and started to unravel, other parts frayed and discoloured. But all parts are valid, part of the art and of the self.

Covering the masks and hands of these figures was important to me for many reasons. The face and head mask true emotions, and the hands make wrong or false actions that are aligned with the mask. I wanted these areas of patchwork to stand out. Any costume too elaborate could very quickly throw off these parts of the sculptures that were already so full of contrasting colours and textures. Each clown was appropriately dressed for the occasion, having their own familiar costume motifs—frilled collars and sleeves, pompoms and unusually large buttons. Amongst the patchwork materials, I chose cotton scraps that had a muted or aged quality to them, and hand-dyed and sewed the cotton clown costumes to match. All the colours are intentionally slightly off, as if they have faded unevenly; materials that once may have been bright and saturated with colour are now well-worn. This is the medium most dear to me. There is something so special that happens when time and care are put into the items we love and cherish to keep them in our lives, repairing something that is torn or broken and being able to see this time in visible mending. Since the inception of my textile practice, I have used repurposed and second-hand fabrics to build faces and images that communicate narratives of my childhood. This way of making has brought me solace and often closure to internal conflicts, either when engaging directly with the subject matter or just ruminating on thoughts while working with the material.

The French American artist Louise Bourgeois has exerted a significant influence on my work, particularly her textile works. With a family history in tapestry repair, she also talks about the connection between sewing and repairing. Her parents ran an antique tapestry gallery in Paris

while also managing a tapestry restoration atelier; while her mother oversaw a team of workers and repairs out of their family home, her father sold the tapestries in the gallery in the city. A key theme in Bourgeois' work is her view of her mother, 'the spider,' a tireless weaver and repairer, as well as complicated feelings of abandonment about her father's infidelity.[16] For Bourgeois, art making was also a tool or strategy that provided understanding and release, working through memories of childhood and family dysfunction.

The 2022 exhibition and accompanying book, *Louise Bourgeois: The Woven Child*, focuses on Bourgeois' textile works from the later years of her career. In the mid-1990s, she began working with textiles, at first from a collection of clothing she had accumulated over her life and that remained intact—her mother's and her own clothing dating back to childhood. Such garments with specific memories attached are part of installations known as 'Cells,' where they "conjure missing bodies or a sense of physical absence and loss."[17] In Bourgeois' work, items that have more or less personal significance attached—clothing, as well as table linens, napkins, handkerchiefs and, later, fragments of tapestry—appear visibly stitched together, having been cut up and altered to create a range of figurative forms.

> Sewing implies repairing. There is a hole … you have to hide the damage. You have to hide the urge to do damage. There is a background of drama here … that something bad you have done must be undone. I sew … I do what I can. This goes back to my mother … she repaired things … she repaired everything. But there is a limit to that. When you mend things, it allows you to have your hands occupied, to look intensely, and never meet the eyes of other people. You can even be moral about it … you can say, 'I am repairing your clothes.'[18]

Works such as *Cell XXVI* (2003), a body suspended and twisted within a cage, were of great inspiration when I was deciding how I might manipulate the bodies of my own sculptures. See also her severed heads—richly textured sculptures, each displaying visceral emotions, some with multiple faces, such as *Cell XIV (Portrait)* (2000).

The practices of sewing, mending, care and healing are often undertaken by women—jobs necessary for survival, yet receiving very little recognition or appreciation, as mass production and globalised labour make these practices 'obsolete.' We have lost (though perhaps many of us are also trying to revive) appreciation for time, care and longevity. In my textile art practice, I aim to reclaim what would be traditionally understood as 'women's work,' and to challenge the hierarchy between fine art and domestic craft by emphasising the visual language of mending. Intentionally visible stitches, puckering, frayed edges—not only do these characteristics of my work communicate pain, repair and undoing, but they also reject idealisation and perfection. My life is messy, my health unpredictable, and so are the stitches holding together each piece of material.

I am fortunate that my way of working allows me to work while mostly sitting down, something crucial for people with POTS. A flare-up can be caused by anything, such as being too hot, too cold, standing or sitting too long or moving too much, because my body cannot regulate itself or circulate blood correctly. I constantly have to be conscious of balance, and it is frustrating when most of the given frameworks for success demand that you be forever moving, accomplishing and accumulating assets, whether tangible or social: "[Capitalism] requires that everyone live in a system that equates success with profit and links failure to the inability to accumulate wealth even as profit for some means certain losses for others."[19]

I find I struggle a lot with the power balance between the pressure to be something or someone and simply being a person, or at least a person sufficiently 'fleshed out.' So much goes into the latter. You cannot just *be*; you have to talk, go outside, socialise, network, wash, earn money, eat and water yourself. And to be an artist, at least in my experience, is to see everything, feel it so deeply and struggle to pick different experiences apart; followed closely by finding time to put myself back together again. I do not want my work to romanticise self-destructive tendencies, or indeed ways of coping, but rather to communicate the struggle to find balance. Sometimes this can look and feel like a choice between one form of self-destruction and another. Or maybe I am just choosing one option that seems more aligned with a sense of self that is, in any case, in flux, learning to pick my battles—or learning, at least, what it is I am fighting for.

Engaging with textile art, a slow mode of practice, has helped me greatly with slowing down in other aspects of life. Embroidery is a repetitive and meditative practice, in which fingers connect to a needle, to thread and then to the material and another and myself.[20] At times, I was unwell during the making of the *Poor Sick Clown* project. I also worked on many drawings; some for planning (trying out concepts that could potentially become realised sculptures), others to stay engaged. Each drawing is inspired by young adulthood and what I guess I have missed out on—in part, trying to follow the popular exhortation to 'have fun' in ways I can, while also expressing the pain young adulthood truly is or has been, for me and many others.

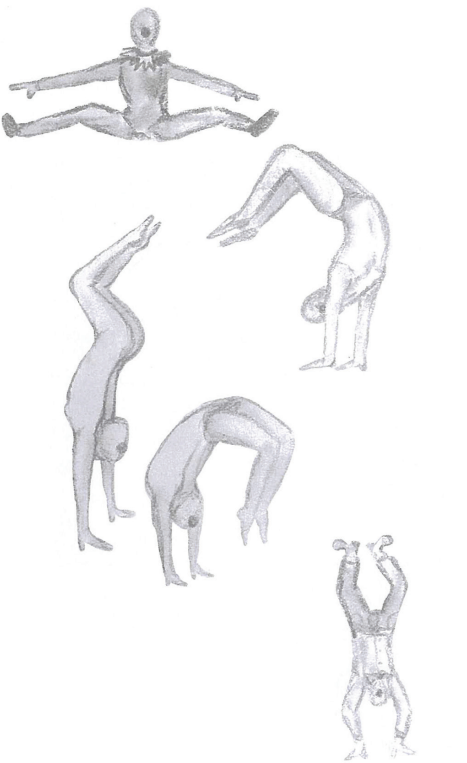


Figure 5. Original sketch of acrobatic clowns.



Figure 6. Original sketch for *Don't Worry, I'm Fine It Happens All The Time*.

Each clown that did become a fully realised sculpture embodies a certain feeling I have about wanting to participate and show up versus needing to rest. Introduced earlier, *Don't Worry, I'm Fine It Happens All The Time* (fig. 2) was the first of three that relate most directly to POTS, one of the symptoms being blood pooling in my legs and feet, causing faintness and nausea. I created large concrete clown boots, pulling, weighing down the clown's limp body—yet it still smiles.

I'm Getting There was the second of the three clowns, a life-size functional pop-up cone puppet. This concept had several different sketched-out iterations due to conflicting feelings about it. The idea was that a pop-up clown puppet can be completely pulled into itself, a welcome refuge when burnt out, taking time to rest, but also one that is easy to get stuck and isolated within. On the outside, it can be exciting and fulfilling, but it can also be scary and vulnerable. There is a desperate pushing and pulling, hence the irony of the title. I have drawn this clown in different positions, desperately pulling itself out, lying down serenely, hiding away safely inside, and being sucked up entirely (fig. 7). Each has a different mask and expression, from smiling and frowning to no mouth at all.

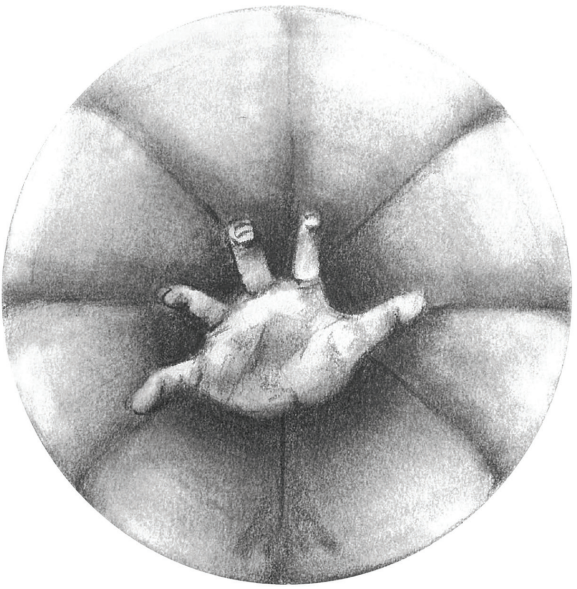


Figure 7. Original sketch of a hand, reaching out from a cone, iteration of *I'm Getting There*.

The third clown, *Bending Over Backwards*, also references puppetry. Raised on a round stand, the clown leans dramatically backwards at an unnatural angle to meet the gaze of the viewer looking down at this poor fool. The figure was inspired by a push-up puppet: once its button is pressed, the character or animal's legs go limp and collapse underneath its body. I associate the work with feelings of bending backwards too much for people and not listening to my body until it is too late.

Puppets have been used for thousands of years to tell stories, both documentary and fiction. They are a useful tool in art making to represent manipulation and abuse of power—the feeling that my life experiences are being pulled, manipulated and positioned by the puppeteer, men and by extension the patriarchy. David Currell, a leading researcher on puppets, has pointed out this helpless status of the puppet: "When an actor makes his entrance, he represents: when a puppet makes an entrance it has no identity outside its performance, and it does not bring any other associations onto the stage."[21] A sense of powerless is I fact a pervasive global condition. Trying to stay engaged in comparatively arbitrary pursuits, during genocides, during climate disaster, creates a paradox for me. All these horrible things are happening all at once, while the vast majority of people are expected to go about their day. My responses range from a 'how does the whole world not stop to help those who are hurting, life is a sick joke' mentality to 'nothing is funny, and how can I complain about my comparably privileged life while this is happening?' This project was never directly about specific global issues. But everything is connected.

My clowns, despite their apparent discomfort, still perform; they move, they stand or push themselves up from the ground. In this way, they embody the complicated space between wanting to participate and recognising when participation—or pushing through, performing and keeping up—comes at the expense of one's own health. Making these figures has allowed me to step outside of myself and look at this contradiction with a little more distance. I can recognise that sometimes the act of stopping, resting or failing to perform is not a failure at all. I can reframe this struggle, questioning the expectation that health and healing should look like constant progress, productivity or success. As stated previously, it is hard not to feel like the fool or the comedic relief plagued by misfortunes, so why not lean into it? If I were to take things too seriously, where would I stop? The struggle to find equilibrium through pain, grief and confusion is often dark, but sometimes a little humorous.



Figure 8. Clown on pedestal leaning backwards, original sketch for the sculpture *Bending Over Backwards*.

The figures in *Poor Sick Clown* are caught between performance and collapse. Through them, I have explored what it means to live with a body and mind that cannot always meet the demands of a society structured around productivity, participation and constant performance. The textile processes of stitching, patching and mending offer an alternative model. Rather than striving for perfection or pretending to be whole, I can acknowledge the damage, adapt and repair. While each figure represents specific feelings and experiences being ill and neurodivergent, they also communicate a hopefulness and willingness to show up despite feeling ridiculous. You can see their pain and discomfort, the visible stitching that brings their bodies together, as their bodies twist and fall in unnatural ways.

But rather than seeing the failure to fit into profit-driven definitions of success as an individual shortcoming, this project questions the systems and expectations that define 'success.' Just as the bodies are stitched together, the understanding of self can be continually repaired and remade. Healing is not perfection; it is learning how to live with the seams visible.

Mackenzie Hayward-Williams is a textile and soft sculpture artist living in Ōtepoti. They completed their Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) in sculpture at the Dunedin School of Art in 2025, after completing a BVA in Textiles in 2022. Their practice focuses on patchwork collage covering forms of the face and body, exploring themes of trauma and healing.

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