

I Am in the Guts of This House:

Haunting as a site of artistic inquiry

By

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## *Abstract*

This thesis project utilizes the metaphor of the haunted house to speak about illness, the tension between women and the domestic space, and the connection between our bodies and the spaces we inhabit. Through this project, I am investigating how to use affect, materiality, and metaphor to translate my experiences of illness into sculptural form. My project draws on the Gothic literature of female authors like Shirley Jackson and Charlotte Perkins Gillman, as well as phenomenology and Gaston Bachelard's concept of topoanalysis. The haunted house has a long history of serving as a medium to discuss the complex relationship between women and the restrictive elements of the home in a patriarchal society. I am also interested in how home can serve as a metaphor for the body, and the haunted house therefore as a representation of the ill body. My project questions the home as a site of safety and comfort, as a way of reflecting on distress, illness, and bodily disorientation. In my practice, I am using multiple textile practices, including embroidery, knitting, dyeing, and spinning, alongside found objects, to create immersive textile installations that suggest the rooms of a home. By using features such as suspension, movement, claustrophobia, and embroidered text, this project draws attention to the tenuousness of stability and health. *I am in the guts of this house* prioritizes a lived phenomenological understanding of illness, creating a space to consider the inescapable human experience of pain or illness.

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*When I came here, a door was placed inside my chest.*

*Sometimes I hear a knocking.*

*Something is waiting to come in.*

## The Entryway

*The smell of rust is all around me.*

*My blood is pumping through the floorboards.*

I would rather not delve into the depths of my personal experiences, laying them out here for you to read. I have done enough of that; in hospitals, in therapists' offices, on paperwork, in clinical rooms filled with others who lay themselves bare beside me. I will speak to you, but at a distance, through layers of fabric and thread and the vagaries of poetry. I am writing from the haunted house I live in and I will let its walls and doors and hallways and ghosts speak to you for me.

The house is a useful and easily accessed metaphor for the body. Our homes are vessels for our bodies, in the same way that our bodies are vessels for our minds<sup>1</sup>. Walls are like skin, windows are like eyes, doors are like orifices. Home is often considered to be the place where we feel comfortable and supported, and experience many of our most intimate moments. I am interested in the moments when that comfort is pulled away. This disturbance has become a place for me to speak about my experiences with illness<sup>2</sup>. Our lives often unfold from the house, and by connecting illness and home, my work shares the way that I move through the world in an ill body. I see my body as a haunted house. I do not feel at home here; this body that houses me often betrays me.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion, see: Bachelard, 1969; Jacobson, 2009; McMahon, 2014; Leder, 1990

<sup>2</sup> Disturbance of the home can happen for many reasons. Something as small as renovating the kitchen, or as life altering as violence, may upend our perceptions and feelings of safety. Migration, homelessness, the malfunctioning of our heating system, all impact our ways of being-at-home. In my thesis project, I am focusing on the disruption caused by illness, but discomfort and fear of the home can be extended to innumerable experiences.

In horror, the house is invaded, disrupted, and disoriented. The usual expectations of home as a space of comfort and safety is torn away. It is no longer a space of stability; inside a haunted house, we cannot trust our walls, our doors, or the spaces under our beds. This allows it to be an effective space from which to speak about experiences of illness. As essayist Christine Junker writes of the haunted house, “what do we do when the domestic slips into the undomesticated in a way that makes homes unlivable?” (Junker 2019). If my body is my home, illness has undone its domestication. Things live in my walls, my floorboards creak with invisible footsteps, and things lay in wait behind my doors. If “home is like the body insofar as it is... a place of initial stability and a foundation for the self”, the haunted house is the unstable body, and it houses the unstable and altered self (Jacobson 2009, 361).



Fig. 1: Pip Mamo. *What does this house do while I am asleep?* 2024. Hand-dyed fabric, embroidery floss, found bedframe. Photo: Boya Liang.

My thesis project has grown out of my fascination with haunted houses, and this document will explore just a fraction of the multitudes of stories, histories, and metaphors they can convey. I am interested in the house that is alive and betrays our expectations, and the house that is haunted and wrong. The haunted house is a living creature with agency, one that terrorizes and consumes its inhabitants. Through installation, I utilize fabric, embroidery, found household objects, and concrete to transform the gallery into distorted, house-like spaces. This project has taken on multiple iterations, growing in new directions as I have changed materials, methods, and installation styles. As my work has progressed, I have moved back and forth between found objects, concrete, knitting, and embroidery, removing, adding, and changing elements as the work has expanded. Like a haunted house, its form has been unstable and in a constant state of flux. This document will focus on three iterations: *A Hole In My Skin* (see fig. 5); *What does this house do while I am asleep?* (see fig. 1); and *The walls shiver as they wake*, which will be installed for the final thesis exhibition in March 2025. Because of the iterative nature of this work, the overarching descriptions, features, making process, and concepts are found in all three versions, unless otherwise stated.

*This house has made its home in me.*

*Now it walks inside my hallways.*

During periods of illness, I have been consumed by distorted images of home. When I am ill, the way that I exist in the world becomes entirely different. I no longer reside in the same place I did yesterday. Instead, it feels as though everything around me is changing, rippling, seething. The seams that keep the walls together are split, and out spill all manner of ghosts. This is an

alienating experience; how can I explain these things that cleave my life down the middle? But I've felt this distress mirrored in the Gothic novels of Shirley Jackson and cheesy horror movies. The visions of spectres the characters see, the unsettling of their minds, and the terror they feel in the place they should be safe feels reminiscent of my experiences with illness. When Eleanor is taken over by Hill House and feels her selfhood consumed, I feel a tingle of recognition I don't often feel<sup>3</sup>. When one of the Perron children is pulled from her bed, my chest tightens with sympathy<sup>4</sup>.

This desire to communicate my deepest self is marred by the discomfort of disclosing the details of my periods of illness. The haunted house has become a place from which I can discuss my experiences without addressing them directly. I will hide from you inside the walls, and let the ghosts speak for me.

*When I close my eyes, I see doors.*

*There are spaces waiting for me.*

This document is haunted by snippets of my poetry which I have borrowed from the fabric walls that hang in my installations. Each wall is embroidered with portions of a poem that is part diary entry and part haunted house story. This poem is fragmented and dispersed, unable to be read in its entirety. Instead, it is encountered gradually as you move through the installation. In a similar way, these lines of poetry have been scattered through this document. My poetry is important to the larger work, but including it as a full, transcribed poem feels untrue to its intention. Instead,

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<sup>3</sup> *The Haunting of Hill House*. Shirley Jackson, 1959

<sup>4</sup> *The Conjuring*. Directed by James Wan, 2013

scraps of my voice slip in and out of this document, acting as another version of the voice that is trapped inside the installation walls.

In my work, I am straddling the lines between literary and visual art. Some things can only be known through words and some things can only be known through physical form. Poetry, in the same way as visual art, communicates feelings and images intuitively and with a sort of abstract directness. This directness speaks to the things deepest inside us; when we read, the “image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface” (Bachelard, xxiii). Through incorporation of poetry, I am able to express multiple dimensions of experience, and utilize imagery in different, yet connected ways. The house that is written is wholly different from the house that is sculpted. The doors I open, open into different rooms, depending on how I access them. A poem may be the only way to unlock this particular door. As philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes, “the poetic image [has] a sonority of being. The poet speaks on the threshold of being” (Bachelard, xvi). This “threshold of being” can be accessed both through visual and written art, but each speaks in its own way.

I see poetry as an important phenomenological experience. When we read, the images conjured in each of our heads are individual experiences that can never be fully shared with another person. The things I imagine are my own, and they can only live inside my mind. This allows for a closeness with writing that we do not experience with the physical world. In the privacy of your mind, you take my words and interpret them through the lens of your own imagination. Through poetry, the reader is given the individual experience of image-making in their own head, as opposed to encountering a sculpted image that triggers meaning-making<sup>5</sup>. In this way, I am

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<sup>5</sup> This discussion draws upon the introduction to Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* (xv – xxxix).

engaging with both visual and written art, and borrow from each discipline when my work calls for it.

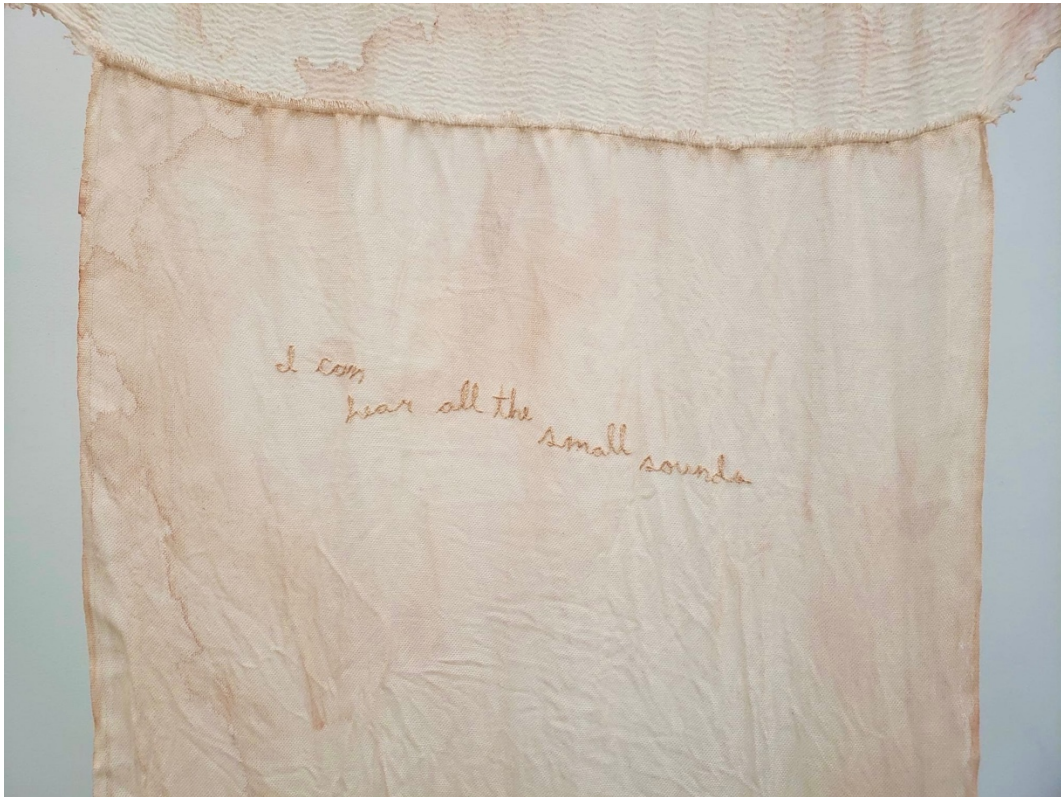


Fig. 2: Pip Mamo. *I can hear all the small sounds*. 2024. Hand-dyed fabric, embroidery floss.

## The Haunted House

*I don't trust this house to stay the same.*

*I sleep with my eyelids pulled back.*

I have been interested in the connection and tension between women and the domestic space for a long time. I see the haunted house as a representation of this difficult relationship. Many women writers have used the gothic genre and haunted houses to discuss their discomfort and struggles with gender roles and femininity. The haunted house can also be seen as a metaphor for the out of control body or mind: it is a being with its own agency that disrupts the privacy, security, and comfort that we usually associate with home. I was interested in how I could use this symbolism to talk about psychological distress and experiences of illness.

Many others before me have allowed houses to speak for them. Women authors like Shirley Jackson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman have utilized supernatural fiction as an outlet to critique patriarchal gender roles that relegate women to domestic spaces, as well as address their own experiences with illness. Both women were writing in times where women were closely tied to home and domesticity; Gilman during the Victorian era of the “separate spheres” doctrine<sup>6</sup>, and Jackson during the North American 1950s, when women were expected to conform to the strict, idealized role of the suburban housewife. Even now, when the vast majority of women have entered the workforce, constructions of femininity continue to associate women with the domestic and “domestic projects – such as nurturing and maintaining the self, the family, and the ‘home

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<sup>6</sup> “Separate spheres doctrine” refers to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century belief that women and men innately have distinct and spatialized roles in society. Women were strictly associated with the private, domestic sphere, and men with the public sphere. While this was more of an ideal than a reality, and was limited to privileged members of society, it was and continues to be deeply influential on Western gender roles and expectations of women.

front’ – rather than with the traditional masculine projects of working outside the home ... and other external accomplishments”, as well as continuing to perform the majority of household labour (Jacobson 2011, 11). Phenomenologist Kristen Jacobson points out that, at the same time, women are vastly more likely than men to suffer from agoraphobia, retreating into the home and becoming “vulnerable and even incapacitated when attempting to emerge into the public arena as a fully participatory agent” (Jacobson 2011, 1). This conflicted, difficult relationship that women often have with the house is important to my work, and I position myself in conversation with them, as well as those who feel trapped in gender roles and expectations.

I move through the world in a body that is seen by others as female, despite my interior experience of gender fluidity<sup>7</sup>. This contentious relationship with femininity and gender creates a clash between self and social perception. In my installations, the domestic realm is distorted and disorienting. I am using this distortion as a way of expressing my feelings of wrongness and distress as a non-binary person, and to examine my own difficult relationship with womanhood.

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<sup>7</sup> While my queerness and gender fluidity has had an impact on my work, I will not be directly addressing this in my thesis. My queerness lives in the background of my work and colours my experience of the world, and I feel it is important for positioning my work, but it is not an integral aspect of this project. Although there are compelling and interesting parallels to be drawn between queerness and haunting, I will be setting it aside for now.

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<https://artblart.com/tag/femme-maison/>

Fig. 3: Louise Bourgeois. *Femme Maison*. 2001. Cheim & Read and Hauser & Wirth.

Louise Bourgeois' sculptures speak about contentious relationships with home and gendered expectations in a similar open, vulnerable way, and have influenced the confessional, personal aspect of my work. The fabric sculptures of bodies Bourgeois made towards the end of her career are particularly impactful to me. Much of this work explores the feelings of inferiority she struggled with as a wife and mother. In 2001, Bourgeois made *Femme Maison*, a truncated patchwork woman's torso with a house emerging from its stomach (see fig. 6). The material connotations found in fabric suggest an innate femininity and domesticity, and the tender stitching captures some women's ambivalence towards traditionally feminine media and domestic craft.

In *The Subversive Stitch*, Rozsika Parker states that the piece “evokes women’s isolation and incarceration in the home as well as suggesting the significance of women as the foundation of the home” (Parker, xix)<sup>8</sup>. *Femme Maison* encapsulates the struggles with domestic entrapment and anxiety Bourgeois often returned to. *Femme Maison* (2001) is a poignant example of the way that Bourgeois’ work was “deeply rooted in her experience” and functions as a “transcription of her own unblinking glimpses into the murkiest waters of the psyche” (Storr, 33). Bourgeois’ trauma and emotions are represented in a way that is highly personal but still deeply relatable to the viewer.

*I can taste the air and it is thick.*

*I can hear all the small sounds.*

*I am in the guts of this house.*

In her essay *The Domestic Tyranny of Haunted Houses in Mary Wilkins Freeman and Shirley Jackson*, Christine Junker discusses how writing supernatural fiction has allowed a space for women to critique the prescribed gender roles that push women into the home through “illuminat[ing] the tension between the home as a refuge from evil and the home as a prison” (Junker). Junker describes the hauntings in both Freeman’s and Jackson’s work as the domestic made permeable. The walls of the house are no longer able to keep the supernatural, and symbolically the patriarchal, at bay. Because of this dissolution of boundaries, the illusion of the house as a space of safety and comfort is torn away.

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<sup>8</sup> While Rozsika Parker’s analysis of Bourgeois’ sculptures is insightful and has aided in my understanding of Bourgeois’ work, I would like to acknowledge that *The Subversive Stitch* has been rightfully criticized for ignoring issues of class and race that are integral to understanding the history of women’s relationship to textile work (Vinebaum, 2013).

In Freeman's stories, feminine domestic objects are possessed, moving around the house and attacking the residents. In Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, the house consumes the identity of the protagonist Eleanor, which is a "cruel parody of the role of women in patriarchal society. Where women are identified with the home, Eleanor's identity becomes the home; where women are discouraged to leave the home, Eleanor dies to avoid leaving it" (Boylan, 24). Both Jackson and Freeman's works display a disruption of the normalcy of the domestic, which makes visible the underlying horror of patriarchy.

Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* was a primary influence and one of the initial reasons that I decided to begin exploring the haunted house as a metaphor. The novel follows four people as they investigate Hill House, a haunted mansion. Led by Dr. Montague, an occult researcher, the four investigators experience unexplainable ghostly activity. As the story continues, the main character Eleanor finds her sense of self slowly consumed by the house, unable to differentiate herself from Hill House.

I am situating my work in conversation with the feminist history of horror literature, and *The Haunting of Hill House* is an integral text. The consumption of Eleanor by a house can be seen as a representation of the role of women in patriarchal societies, which is defined by their relationship to the home. Because of prescribed gendered spaces, "identity becomes spatialized, and the everyday maintenance of a household ... becomes imbued with importance beyond simply maintaining tidiness. Performing domesticity becomes inextricable from performing femininity" (Junker). The descriptions of Hill House's architecture and aura, as well as the way that Eleanor's mind is consumed by the house, have influenced the way that I think about the construction of my installation. Hill House's architecture is off-putting and disorienting; the angles are too sharp, the hallways too narrow and convoluted, the many doors swing shut on their own, and the characters

cannot find their way around the house without a map. In *The walls shiver as they wake* and *What does this house do while I am asleep?* (see fig. 1), the fabric walls twist and turn and confuse the navigation of the space in a similar way.

Throughout haunted house media, I have always felt most connected to the houses that are, themselves, alive. This is particularly present in *The Haunting of Hill House*. Upon entering Hill House for the first time, Eleanor says “I am like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster... and the monster feels my tiny little movements inside” (Jackson, 42). Hill House itself is a being with agency, a being who consumes, feels, and craves. It has no tragic, angry ghost that haunts its halls; the house itself does the haunting. In my thesis work, the movement of fabric walls in response to the viewer’s body is, in effect, registering their “tiny little movements inside”.



Fig. 4: Pip Mamo. *What does this house do while I am asleep?* (installation view) 2024.

Hand-dyed fabric, embroidery floss, found bedframe. Photo: Boya Liang.

In the same way as our homes, objects become extensions of ourselves, and we form intimate relationships with our possessions. In *Home Invasions: Phenomenological and Psychoanalytic Reflections on Embodiment Relations, Vulnerability, and Breakdown*, Laura McMahon states that “things come to be literally incorporated into our bodily experience and ... our vulnerability as embodied individuals is thus extended into the life of [our] things” (McMahon, 358). Our objects contain traces of memory: the crack on the lip of my cup, the imprint of my body on my couch, the stain on the surface of my table, are all remnants of the time I have spent with them. We expect our belongings to stay safely where we leave them, and to stay exactly what we expect them to be. This expectation is undone by haunting, when our objects betray us and become unruly. In *The walls shiver as they wake*, furniture is severed and suspended, revealing the fragile nature of objects, and exploring the idea that “we are as human beings vulnerable to harm not merely at the limits of our skin but in our extended embodiment in things” (McMahon, 363).

We are especially reliant on our beds to keep us safe. While we sleep, we are open, exposed, vulnerable, and completely unaware of the world around us. In haunted house media such as *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Conjuring*, many of the moments of supernatural activity take place in the bedroom or begin while the characters are asleep. While sleeping in Hill House, the characters are awoken by the terrifying banging that echoes down the hallway:

“[T]hey heard the crash against the door across the hall. It was louder, it was deafening, it struck against the door next to them (did it move back and forth across the hall? did it go on feet along the carpet? did it lift a hand to the door?), and Eleanor threw herself away from the bed and ran to hold her hands against the door. ‘Go away,’ she shouted wildly. ‘Go away, go away!’” (Jackson, 129)

The bed in my piece *The walls shiver as they wake* is severed, with only the head and back boards remaining. It sways like the fabric walls, moving in response to the viewer's body, a parody of our assumption that our beds will keep us safe.

My pieces made with found objects have drawn influence from the work of Judith Scott. Scott's sculptures engulf found objects in cocoons of yarn and string. In some, the objects are recognizable, in others they are completely obscured by the built-up layers of yarn (see fig. 5). As a largely non-verbal artist with Down's Syndrome, Scott never discussed the meanings behind her work. Her sculptures are enigmatic, evocative, and embedded with the layers of time she spent with them. The surface of the bed in my work *The walls shiver as they wake* is covered in embroidered fabric, which is then wrapped and wrinkled by layers of white thread (see fig. 6). Like in Scott's work, the process of wrapping functions as an accumulation of time, as well as an act of engulfing.

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Fig 5: Judith Scott, *Untitled*, 1988-1989. Mixed media.



Fig 6: Pip Mamo. *What does this house do while I am asleep?* (detail) 2024. Hand-dyed fabric, embroidery floss, found bedframe. Photo: Boya Liang.

Another story which influenced my understanding of the contentious relationship between the house and women's roles was Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. It is an insightful critique of the medical mistreatment of women and the patriarchal systems that support it by using gothic horror as a medium. Following the birth of her child, the main character is confined to a room for a "rest cure", a common treatment for "hysterical" women at the time. Her husband exerts complete control over her, forbidding her any sort of stimulation and disregarding any input she has regarding her treatment. While there, she is confined to what she thinks is an old nursery, which is papered with a horrible yellow wallpaper. Over the course of her "treatment", she becomes more and more obsessed with the wallpaper. Without anything else to do, she begins to spend hours staring at it, certain that there is a woman trapped inside the pattern. As the story reaches its climax, she becomes determined to rescue the woman from inside the wallpaper. I see the woman in the walls as similar to what lives in the panels in my installation. They are both beings trapped inside the walls, and both the unnamed narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and I are trying to free them. The narrator does this through tearing down the wallpaper, while I am giving this being a voice through my poetry. The character states "there are things in that paper that nobody knows but me" (Gilman, 15). This line echoes through the writing in my installation, which explores my distorted and complicated relationship to home during periods of illness.

*My body feels so light,  
like someone has strung me up above it.  
I can no longer feel fingers on my skin.*

My work also builds upon philosopher Gaston Bachelard's concept of topoanalysis, which is the study of our intimate lives through the structure of our houses and our memories of home. Bachelard approaches home from a lived, phenomenological point of view, analyzing our relationships with home through the lens of poetry and poetic inquiry. Bachelard argues that our homes, particularly our childhood homes, become a fundamental aspect of our being, following us throughout our lives. The distorted home-like spaces I create draw from my experiences of home and function as a study of my visceral and intimate memories.

Bachelard writes that "in order to suggest the values of intimacy, we have to induce in the reader a state of suspended reading" (Bachelard, 13). Suspension is liminal; it is an in-betweenness, a stopping, a suspension of disbelief, and it is an integral part of my work, both metaphorically and physically. I myself feel like a liminal being. Illness keeps me in a liminal state, always lingering at the threshold between health and pain. In my work, the suspended walls are a breathing entity on the brink of transformation, which is an image that has recurred during my experiences with illness and colours my memories of home. Bachelard goes on to say:

"Our past is situated elsewhere, and both time and place are impregnated with a sense of unreality. It is as though we sojourned in a limbo of being... Thus, on the threshold of our space, before the era of our own time, we hover between awareness of being and loss of being. And the entire reality of memory becomes spectral." (Bachelard, 58)

This description of our memories of home being spectral and distorted is a key image in my work. Bachelard's framing of the home in *The Poetics of Space* is largely positive. However, I am interested in the unsettled home, the home that is disturbed, and the home that doesn't quite feel like home. Through my engagement with Bachelard's writing I have gained an understanding of the formative, beautiful experiences of home, which I am then subverting in my thesis project

through the concept of the haunted house. In the following section, I draw on Bachelard's theory of topoanalysis to examine how our homes, bodies, and minds are intimately connected.

## The Walls

*The walls shiver as they wake.*

*Dust settles in my lungs.*

Each of us goes through the world with our homes inside us<sup>9</sup>. We dwell in the world as we have dwelled in our houses, and these foundational experiences of home are carried with us as we move through life. The walls that cradle us, unnoticed in the background, form the “level that allows us to belong somewhere such that we can establish a way of being-in-the-world” (Jacobson 2009, 361). In the essay *A Developed Nature*, Kristen Jacobson writes that “being-at-home is essentially an experience of passivity—i.e., one that rests in the background of our experience and provides a support and structure for our life that goes largely unnoticed and that is significantly beyond our ‘conscious’ control” (Jacobson 2009, 355). Haunting is the ultimate disruption of this passive support. My thesis project utilizes haunting as a way to examine how its disruption of home mirrors the disruption of illness.

Our homes are expected to provide our bodies and minds with a comfort that we do not feel elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> We know our home intimately, as it does us. My hands know that my bedroom

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<sup>9</sup> Kristen Jacobson utilizes phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “levels”, which are “an attunement ... that we have with our surroundings ... by which we are able to have and navigate a world” in order to discuss how our homes develop our fundamental ways of being in the world, starting with our childhood home (Jacobson 2009, 366). This notion is not constrained to a fixed location, but rather “contributes to our ability to ‘make ourselves at home’ or to ‘be at home’ in places and situation far from our ‘objective’ home” (Jacobson 2009, 369).

<sup>10</sup> In *Feminist Reflections on the Phenomenological Foundations of Home*, Luna Dolezal posits that home is an important aspect of human subjectivity, while also acknowledging the gendered history that influences our perceptions of home. She states that “the human subject yearns and needs to be lodged in a native place, to feel as though one has come from somewhere, belongs somewhere, and has a context on which one’s being can rest and return” (102). However, home has many layers of troubled aspects: it is only achievable through a “level of material privilege... elud[ing] the displaced”, as well as being a “highly gendered concept, where the associations between homemaking, domesticity, and women’s social roles have an oppressive and continuing history”. Home may also entrench the gendered division of labour and can even be a site of violence (103).

door will not latch without an extra tug. My feet know how to angle themselves on the too narrow stairs. My hips know to tilt around the awkwardly placed countertop. This understanding of the quirks of my home is a subconscious, bodily knowledge, and, according to Jacobson, my way of being-at-home follows me throughout my life.

In my thesis project, the expectation of home as enclosed, safe, and comfortable is challenged. I have been exploring how the house, through haunting, no longer supports the body and the mind, which mirrors my own experience of my mind and body no longer supporting me during periods of illness. In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, philosopher Sara Ahmed writes, "spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body" (Ahmed, 9). We take this second skin for granted. As we move through the world, we expect walls to stay still, angles to stay the same, and objects to stay where we've left them. In the same way, our bodies exist, unnoticed, in the background, providing stability for our being. Our bodies exist entirely within the world; we are not separate from warmth, wind, cold, or touch. Changes to our environments are felt in our bodies, and this lived environment extends to our homes. Houses are a version of the world built to support us; they are created to contain our bodies and function as a layer of protection from the outside world (Jacobson 2009, 361-2; Leder, 34). Because of this connection between our bodies and our homes, disruptions to the space of our homes also disrupt our perception of our bodies. This thesis project examines how disruption can be simulated within the gallery, as a way to express my own feelings of bodily disorientation during periods of illness.

At the same time that my body is disoriented during periods of illness, my body also disorients the spaces I inhabit. Ahmed writes that some bodies inherently disrupt spaces: "disorientation is unevenly distributed [and] some bodies more than others have their involvement

in the world called into crisis” (159). While Ahmed goes on to write about how this is experienced by racialized people in dominantly white spaces, I feel that this can also be extended to the visibly ill body.

I have struggled with self-injury since I was a child. As I walk through the world, the evidence of my illness is impossible to ignore. The scars that layer my skin, the bandages I am sometimes wrapped in, all embody my illness. I see others notice my skin, do double takes, and look away with discomfort. In *Carved in Skin: Bearing Witness to Self-Harm*, Jane Kilby writes that self-cut skin “speaks with a ‘voice’ so sheer that it is virtually impossible for anyone to bear witness to it. Arguably, then, there is something about this ‘voice’ that defies witnessing, even as it insistently demands it” (124). When my body is not enclosed in fabric, my voice speaks through my skin, regardless of if I would like it to or not, often disorienting the spaces around me. The embroidery in my work is a voice that has scarred the fabric. It is there, risen, permanently inscribed, now unable to keep its voice and presence hidden, like my scars that I will never be able to hide from. I am always navigating between hiding myself beneath my clothes, or letting my body inhabit the world unencumbered by the suffocation of fabric.

In my installations, I transform the gallery into a series of small rooms which are formed by pink embroidered fabric panels. The panels are suspended in such a way that the movement of the viewer’s body makes them twist and turn, never staying in the same position. The space becomes a source of disorientation for the viewer’s body, at the same time that their body disorients the space. While inside *The walls shiver as they wake* and *What does this house do while I am asleep?*, the viewer’s movement changes the gallery space as they move through it. They may become aware of the effect that their movement has on the walls, as well as how the walls’ movement affects how they are able to maneuver through the gallery. When they turn, the

installation may have changed, leaving them open and vulnerable to eyes they may not have expected.

*If I am not careful, I will slip into these walls.*



Fig. 7: Pip Mamo. *A Hole In My Skin*, detail. 2024. Hand-dyed fabric, embroidery floss.

Photo: Boya Liang.

The materiality of the fabric walls is especially integral to the experience and meaning of the work. Fabric follows us through our lives, whether we notice it or not, and has an especially intimate relationship with our body. In *Writing Textile, Making Text: Cloth and Stitch as Agency for Disorderly Text*, Catherine Dormer writes that “cloth, like human skin, is a membrane that

divides an interior from an exterior. It both reveals and conceals” (Dormer, 8). This description of cloth as a membrane of division can be similarly applied to the walls of a house, especially that of the haunted house. The walls of our house keep us separate from the outside world, providing us with a perceived layer of protection, in the same way that fabric surrounds our bodies. However, fabric is still permeable, and haunted walls provide no protection. Both fabric and the house are in a state of change, collecting memories of the bodies that reside inside them. Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey write that “skin is temporal in the sense that it... materializes [the passing of time] in the accumulation of marks, of wrinkles, lines and creases, as well as in the literal disintegration of skin” (Ahmed and Stacey, 2). Like skin, fabric collects time through wrinkles, stains, or moth-eaten holes, each mark a past moment that haunts it. The house collects time through scuffs on the floor, the clogging of drains, or layers of paint.

Each of the fabric walls in my installation are hand dyed, and the imperfection of my technique leaves marks and stains. I dye without using a mordant<sup>11</sup>, leaving the fabric unfixed and changeable, vulnerable to light and water. In order to dye fabric correctly, you must first scour and mordant it. I did not know this when I dyed my first pieces. I simply submerged them in the dye bath and hoped for the best. Because of the lack of fixative, when I went to rinse the fabric, water stains bloomed across the surface (see fig. 7). I was transfixed by them. When I dyed my second piece, I had done more research, and laboured over the fabric preparation. When I finally removed it from the dye bath and went to create the stains, the dye wouldn’t budge. I’ve been chasing the beautiful, organic water marks in every subsequent piece, but as hard as I try, I’ve only been able to recreate that original magic a handful of times. However, each fabric panel has its own imperfections, like our own skin.

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<sup>11</sup> Mordant is a substance, such as alum or iron, which is used in the dyeing process to fix the dye onto the fabric. This keeps the fabric colourfast, meaning that the dye is not as susceptible to fading due to light or washing.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions. Image viewable at <https://lotuskang.com/in-cascades-contemporary-art-gallery-vancouver>

Fig. 8: Lotus L. Kang. *In Cascades*. 2023. Photo: Andy Keate.

In Lotus L. Kang's 2023 exhibition *In Cascades*, the artist combines photography, mold making, and found objects into an immersive installation. I encountered this exhibition towards the end of the first semester of my MFA, and it was critical in developing my thesis project. One of the central elements of the exhibition are large, unfixed light sensitive photographic films. Because they are unfixed, the photo films are continually changing in response to the environment. Over the course of exhibition, the films slowly develop, altering their hue as they are exposed to light and humidity. They contain the residue and memory of every movement and fluctuation of their lives, developing in different ways depending upon the quality of light, humidity, and

movement of human bodies. In this constant state of transformation, they become living beings whose surface contains every marker of the passing of their lives, like one's own body.

The walls in my installations are also meant to suggest the body; they are thin, permeable, and have a slight movement, and are made of a material that has an inherent connection to the body. My walls are also unfixed through the lack of mordant, which allows them to change over time in a similar way to Kang's photographic films. The design of Kang's exhibition was also influential. I am fascinated by the way that the large films divided the gallery, hiding the cast objects and directing the viewer through the space.

## The Bedroom

*It seems so still in the night.*

*What does this house do while I am asleep?*



Fig. 9: *A Hole In My Skin* (installation view). 2024. Hand-dyed fabric, embroidery floss, concrete, hand-spun yarn. Photo: Boya Liang.

In each of the works in my thesis project, the fabric walls breathe as the viewer moves among them. The image of the walls breathing is one that has come back to me throughout my experiences with illness. Lying in bed, I watch the walls inhale and exhale, terrified that one day they will pull me inside them. These experiences are too intense and visceral for me to explain

with words alone, and are more effectively shared through physical, sensorial experiences and metaphor.

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes that “it is through this movement out into the world that the extreme privacy of the occurrence begins to be sharable, that sentience becomes social and thus acquires its distinct human form” (Scarry, 170). The way I exist in the world while I am ill is almost incomprehensibly different from my times of health. By embodying my experiences in sculptural form, I try to pull them out of me in a way that allows me relief, as well as giving others a glimpse of understanding. Although my illness is entirely my own, all of us suffer, albeit in very different ways. By sharing the multitudes of ways of suffering that we experience, we can connect with each other and attempt to see ourselves in others. I hope that inhabiting my installations allows others to consider the inescapable human experience of pain or illness and extend compassion to ill people. In Jill Bennett’s *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, she writes about what she calls *sense memory*, which is the memory held in the body outside of thought; it “operates through the body to produce a kind of ‘seeing truth’ rather than ‘thinking truth’, registering the pain of memory as it is directly experienced, and communicating a level of bodily affect” (Bennett, 26). This embodied experience of pain is an essential part of my work, and I am using sense memory to translate my illness into sculpture. The movement of my illness into the world through the process of making allows me to make sense of myself, and to find meaning in my suffering.

Authors Shirley Jackson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman both experienced periods of illness, and their depictions of haunted houses speak to me about those experiences. Through the historical development of psychiatry, definitions of “appropriate femininity or masculinity were closely linked to definitions of madness. Not conforming to a norm risks the label of deviance or madness”

(Appignanesi, 7). When charting the experiences of women who have been labeled “mad” through psychiatric history, Lisa Appignanesi examines the ways that women’s bodies and the expectations of gendered roles have been used against them.

The current biomedical approach to mental illness prioritizes diagnosis and identification of biological causes. This diagnosis is done by a supposedly objective doctor, who then outlines what they think will be the ideal course of treatment. As someone who has been diagnosed with a multitude of illnesses by a multitude of doctors, and given multitudes of medications and treatment programs, I feel that this approach ignores the individual, everyday experiences of those living with illness<sup>12</sup>.

In her essay *Being at Home: A Feminist Phenomenology of Disorientation in Illness*, Corinne Lajoie states that the gap between individual experience and biomedical treatment “undermines the richness of our understanding of mental illness and the quality of our ways of attending to it” as well as “lack[ing] an exploration of the dynamic coexistence between the body as a neurobiological entity... and the experiencing body” (Lajoie, 548 - 9). I am interested in understanding illness as a lived experience, beyond simple psychiatric and biomedical diagnosis. However, I find it difficult to express my illness with words. I want to talk to you and tell you what it’s like to inhabit my body, but I am afraid of you. What might you think of me if I tell you these things?

This push and pull between sharing and not sharing, as well as my longing for connection and fear of what might come with it, is embodied in my work. The poetic voice of the being in the

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<sup>12</sup> In a recent study from the University of Liverpool, *Heterogeneity in Psychiatric Diagnosis Classification*, researchers concluded that “psychiatric diagnoses are scientifically worthless as tools to identify discrete mental health disorders”. This stems from subjective diagnostic rules, overlap in symptoms, and masking of trauma or adverse life events. Using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), researchers found that diagnostic labeling represents “a disingenuous categorical system” that may create stigma and prejudice. Professor John Read of the University of East London says, “perhaps it is time we stopped pretending that medical-sounding labels contribute anything to our understanding of the complex causes of human distress or of what kind of help we need when distressed”.

embroidered walls is desperate for acknowledgment of its pain. Its distress and suffering is inscribed on the fabric, forever evidence of what it has been through. At the same time, it attempts to hide. The words that are embroidered on the fabric are obscured by their colour and move away from the viewer, pulling back at the same time that they are so desperate to be known. Its story is complex and hard to follow. The non-linearity of the narrative confuses attempts to understand its experience. It doesn't reveal itself immediately: only if the viewer spends the time following it through the space are they able to understand it. The panels themselves are of varying opacities, some allowing the viewer to see through to the other side of the room, some denying viewing entirely. Instead of addressing you directly, my installations talk through layers of fabric and metaphors, and let you walk through the rooms of my haunted house.

## The Stitch

*I am never alone here. I see their little breaths.*

*I cut a hole in my skin to let their pain in.*

Image removed due to copyright restrictions. Image viewable at  
<https://thepolyphony.org/2021/09/02/i-plunge-headlong-into-disaster-unstitching-agnes-richters-jacket/>

Fig. 10: Agnes Richter. Handmade jacket embroidered with autobiographical text. 1895.

Prinzhorn Collection.

In 1893, a woman named Agnes Richter was incarcerated at Hubertusburg asylum in Germany. During her 26 years in confinement, Richter embroidered her thoughts and experiences on a handmade jacket that she wore in her day-to-day life. Richter's jacket is a profoundly

evocative object. I imagine her wearing it in the asylum, the documentation of her reality close to her skin. I imagine each stitch accumulating like the years she spent locked away. Both time and the sweat of her body has eroded the embroidered words, but the phrase “I plunge headlong into disaster” is still legible. Throughout my life, I have also been subjected to involuntary hospitalization. From here, in the moment that I live in, I am speaking to women like Agnes Richter, who I feel some kindred, heart-wrenching connection to. Like her, I am stitching my experiences into fabric, the words instead accumulating on the symbolic walls I live inside.

Catherine Dormer writes that the seam is the trace of a wound, and the creation of a seam is a liminal process; the “needle and thread appear to alter and suspend time and meaning” (Dormer, 7). A seam functions as the interstice, or the space between. In my thesis work, each fabric panel is made with two pieces that have been seamed together. The fibres of the two fabrics do not blend, but are held together with no attempt to disguise their difference. This visible difference is emphasized by the raw edges of the fabric, and the undisguised hem. The line of the seam is their liminal meeting place.

I have conflicted feelings about needles. They are used for healing and mending at the same time they pierce and injure. The seaming together of separate fabrics is a suturing together, like the closing of an open wound. At the same time, stitches are like a scar. The memory of the wound haunts the body as a scar, as embroidery haunts fabric. Embroidery holds the memory of the needle’s violence, leaving the remnants of the injury in the shape of words. The embroidery floss thickens the surface of the fabric like a risen scar, which is further emphasized by the fleshy pink colour.

Each fabric panel also holds the memory of the time I have spent with it. Embroidery is a tedious task. I sit, curled up, cradling the hoop with my body, with the fabric draping over me, for

hours at a time. In order to embroider smoothly, each stitch I make is a tiny backstitch. The backstitch involves a repetitive too-ing and fro-ing, always moving backwards after it moves forwards. To create a single word may take half an hour. There is a tenderness to the way I work that belies both the violence of the action and the darkness of the words that I am stitching. Every stitch is important; even the slightest mistake, one misplaced stitch, a few millimetres of difference, is jarringly obvious, so I am completely devoted to each one. I steady myself, I embrace my hoop, and my needle descends.

## Concrete

*These windows must stay closed.*

*If they open, my body will finally break,*

*Not with a crack, but with a sigh.*

Concrete is a material charged with physical and cultural meaning. It is an everyday, urban material that is very different from the softness and domesticity of the other everyday materials I am using. The heaviness, strength, and physicality of concrete provide an important juxtaposition with the textiles that dominate my work. Both concrete and yarn are materials closely connected to the body: spinning yarn and mixing concrete are extremely physical acts that bring my body closer to the materials; concrete suggests the weight of the body or the constraints we may put upon it; yarn suggests the cloth we clothe ourselves in, as well as the softness or unruliness of our bodies. My work with concrete and hand-spun yarn illustrates the tension between body and mind. The hard lines and weight of the concrete represent attempted control over the body, while the yarn spills out like the struggling mind below the surface



Fig. 11: *A Hole In My Skin* (detail). 2024. Concrete, hand-spun yarn. Photo: Boya Liang.

In Jill Bennett's *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, she explores how the affective quality of an artwork can transmit meaning and traumatic experiences through engagement with sensation, rather than being communicated through narrative. She says that trauma-related art "often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the 'secret' of personal experience" (Bennett, 7). This is particularly important to me, as I am making work about intimate and disturbing personal experiences but have chosen not to address these experiences explicitly in my writing. Drawing from philosopher Gilles Deleuze, Bennett discusses how feeling can facilitate deep thought, writing that "affect or emotion is a more effective trigger for profound thought because of the way in which it grasps us, forcing us to engage involuntarily" (Bennett, 7).

This involuntary emotional engagement with an artwork is particularly important to me, as I want the viewer to be emotionally affected when experiencing my installations.

I'm not sure what triggered my initial draw towards concrete. After working with found objects for the first two semesters of my degree, I wanted to make objects of my own. I was looking for a physical and emotional contrast to the light, soft work I had been making, and concrete felt like a material that was symbolically closer to the heavy emotions I wanted to convey. As I worked, I focused entirely on the process of experimenting and discovering the potentials of concrete and yarn. The push between these two very different materials is never quite the same. No matter how carefully I lay the yarn, the concrete has its own ideas, consuming parts, exposing others, and flowing in ways I can never predict.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions. Image viewable at  
<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/134054/untitled>

Fig. 12: Doris Salcedo. *Untitled*. 1992. Art Institute Chicago.

Doris Salcedo has been deeply influential on my work, even before I began working with concrete. Salcedo uses concrete to embody grief in a physical form, trapping household objects in concrete to represent losses that households have suffered. Empty parts of the object are filled with concrete, representing the weight of loss and the way that pain and grief manifest themselves in households. In *Empathic Vision*, Jill Bennett discusses Salcedo's work, saying that "the sensation arising in space... is the operative element: its capacity to sustain sensation... rather than to communicate meaning" (Bennett, 18). I'm inspired by the affective quality of her sculptures, and the way that they trigger feelings of grief even without knowing the stories behind them; this emotional quality is something I'm hoping to convey in my pieces. My use of yarn is more abstract, but I feel that concrete as a material conveys ideas of weight, pressure, and loss. Formally, I am interested in how Salcedo combines concrete with found objects to amplify their emotive qualities.

Moving forward, I have decided to not include the pieces made with concrete in my final thesis exhibition. After spending time trying to integrate the two aspects into a cohesive installation, I have come to the realization that they are two separate bodies of work. In the installation *A Hole In My Skin*, I experimented with multiple installation methods before deciding on the version that was shown at the 2024 State of Practice exhibition (see fig. 11). While I am happy with the end result, I realized that I was struggling unnecessarily to put these two distinct things together. Moving forward, I am still interested in delving into the possibilities of concrete, but as its own discrete exploration.



Fig. 13: *A Hole In My Skin*. 2024. Concrete, hand-spun yarn, fabric, embroidery floss. Photo:

Boya Liang.

## The Back Door

*My body has left me here in this smothering pink.*

*The walls of my body are gone, torn down,  
and I am now held together only by the grace of this house.*

*I try to stumble, to claw my way through the thick air  
but I have no hands to claw with, no legs to crawl.*

*I am an endless expanse, but I feel so small, too small for this place, this trembling place,  
but I have no body with which to tremble, so the fear runs out of me like scattering rats.*

*I hear their little cries, but they are snuffed out by this soft and terrifying vastness,  
the smell of rust cloying and heavy.*

*I have never felt a love so terrible, all around me, a suffusion of sickly loving horror  
like sinking forever faceless into the floor.*

*But can I sink now, bodiless and dismembered?*

*This house is always dark, always night, but I never sleep.*

*I have no mind to dream with.*

*I wish one day to close my eyes.*

I am still looking for a way to exit this project. After working through so many iterations, I still feel like I am fumbling around, grasping at things that continue to elude me. The topics that have informed this project are so vast that I feel it would be silly to say I have come to some sort of conclusion. However, through the process of making this body of work, I have created my own individual theoretical framework that utilizes poetic inquiry, phenomenology, haunting, and

disability theory in a unique way. I have also worked through some of the fears I have had about making work about vulnerable experiences. The theoretical framework I developed draws upon my feelings of ambivalence regarding disclosure and non-disclosure, which is important to the understanding of and the development of my work.



Fig. 14: *The walls shiver as they wake* (installation view). 2024. Hand-dyed fabric, embroidery floss, hand-spun yarn, found objects, thread.

The work I showed at the final thesis exhibition was titled *The walls shiver as they wake*. This work has been discussed throughout my thesis, as all the elements in the previous iterations were incorporated into the final installation, but the act of installing itself revealed new aspects, and helped me understand where to develop from here. Because of the iterative nature of my process, this final piece built upon the previous installation, and culminated in an installation that

incorporated elements of my previous work. In particular, it included the embroidered panels which I have been working on for over a year now. By the time of the final thesis exhibition, I had made fifteen of the panels. The slow accumulation of these pieces allowed my poetry to emerge over time; I jotted down thoughts as they came to me, gathering them slowly in my journal to pick them over later. Throughout this program, poetry has been especially important to the process of making this work, functioning as a way to both reveal and obfuscate my inner world. This project has brought me back to my love of writing, and I plan to continue in the future, whether it be as standalone poems or integrated into new sculptures.

An element of the installation that I didn't anticipate until the end of the program was the immersive fabric wall covering. As I began thinking through the final installation, I realized that the stability and hard lines of the white gallery walls would disrupt the immersive, unstable quality of the work. The process of creating and installing the wall hangings was quite laborious. Each of the 12-foot-tall panels had to be dyed by hand, and for a week my kitchen was taken over by the dyeing process. I only have a single dye pot, so it was a constant cycle of preparing dye baths and processing fabrics. Because of the massive, cumbersome amount of fabric, each piece had to be hung separately, then sewn together by hand during the installation process. I spent hours going up and down ladders, stitching with one arm wrapped around the leg of the ladder. The process almost felt like a performance; I was working in the public area of the school, and people often stopped to watch me sew. I've always felt uncomfortable working where anyone can see me, but this installation challenged me to spend dozens of hours working in full view of anyone who walked past.

The laborious process was worthwhile in the end. The complete engulfment of the gallery in pink fabric created a space that felt separate from the rest of the world. I think that this feeling

of otherworldliness encouraged viewers to spend time with the installation. As I watched people engage with the work, it was gratifying to see that many took their time to experience it. I hope that those who were able to take the time to read all of the poetry felt rewarded with a deeper knowledge of the work.

The academic research I have done during the course of my thesis project has given me a scaffolding I can build upon in the future, and I am looking forward to continuing to build my understanding of these complex topics. Moving forward, I hope to learn more about the concept of the uncanny, or *unheimlich*. This was a concept that I had begun to research during the beginning of the program, but I left behind as my project developed. *Unheimlich* directly translates to “unhomely”, and I think that it would be an interesting addition to my work surrounding discomfort and the unsettling of home. In *The Architectural Uncanny*, architectural critic Anthony Vidler applies the concept of the uncanny to our experiences with home. He says that “the house provide[s] an especially favoured site for uncanny disturbances: its apparent domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits” (Vidler, 17). This contrast between comfort and fear is an important factor in my work, and the concept of the uncanny could help me expand in the future. Vidler refers to the uncanny as “a domesticated version of absolute terror” (Vidler, 3). I think this idea could be an important supplement to my research surrounding the haunted house.

Through the making of my thesis project, my artistic practice has developed in ways that I could never have anticipated. The ability to develop work slowly over the course of iterations was a new way of working which allowed me to understand each installation as an experimental artistic process in itself. Because of this, I felt confident making mistakes, trying things that didn’t work,

and building off of each iteration. This act of iteration will continue on past my MFA. Developing my thesis project has opened up many unexpected doors inside my mind. Now that we've walked together through the rooms of my house, do we know each other better?



Fig. 15: *The walls shiver as they wake* (installation view). 2024. Hand-dyed fabric, embroidery floss, hand-spun yarn, found objects, thread.



Fig. 16: *The walls shiver as they wake* (detail)



Fig. 17: *The walls shiver as they wake* (detail).



Fig. 18: *The walls shiver as they wake* (detail)

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