

The Art of Inking the Body: Pain, Symbolism and Healing through Tattooing

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Abstract

This visual research focuses on tattooing as a grief and healing ritual in the context of my personal experiences. Some years ago, I underwent a significant episode of change in my personal and professional life. This was accompanied by severe depression and anxiety. I gravitated towards acquiring symbolic tattoos to navigate this period of struggle and memorialise myself in that moment; and as that took place, I could feel myself undergoing significant change. Through the ritual of tattooing, I could physically materialise the emotional pain I was experiencing at the time.

Influenced by artists Fabio Viale (b. 1975) and Shawn Barber (b. 1970), I use various mediums, including pen, oil, acrylic, tattoo ink, resin, video, and sound to explore tattooing's role in processing emotional pain, grief, and change in identity. This thesis situates my personal experiences within broader cultural contexts, showing how tattoos connect and communicate on both individual and interpersonal levels. I unpack how tattooing qualifies as such a ritual and a meaningful way to alleviate emotional pain with physical pain as a transformative experience. As tattoos are symbolic images in the skin, I explore how symbolism is involved in this process and the dynamic of grief and healing, and, as a result, its impact on individual and social identity.

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Ethics

Research at Rhodes University is administered by the Rhodes University Ethical Standards Committee (RUESC) and guided by the RUESC handbook.
A copy is available here: <https://ruconnected.ru.ac.za/course/view.php?id=5399>.


This research does not involve human participants and therefore does not require ethics approval.

Signature: 

Name: Nicole Anne Bower

Declaration

I, Nicole Anne Bouwer, declare that this is my own work, and that the sources used have been cited with complete bibliographic references. This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment, alongside my body of practical work, of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Rhodes University. This research has not been submitted before for any other degree at any other university.

Signature: 

Date: November 2024

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

I was four months old when my father passed away unexpectedly, transforming my mother and me into a family of two (1995). As the years went by, I remember suddenly feeling an overwhelming sense of panic one morning when I was in grade 9 (2009). This sensation would worsen in the mornings, manifesting physically with nausea and tension throughout my body. After weeks of experiencing this, I attended an appointment with our family GP and was eventually treated with nausea medication. Nothing worked. Not understanding what I was experiencing, I gradually came to accept my anxious symptoms as normal, convincing myself that this was simply who I was. The feeling would come and go over the years, but it became life-changing in 2017 when I moved to Cape Town, South Africa and started my first full-time job. I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety in 2019. Depression can be described as a mood disorder which brings on feelings of inadequacy, pessimism, sadness, and behavioural changes such as decreased activity. These depressive symptoms can severely disturb a person's life, sometimes to the extent that they become suicidal (Iyer et al, 2012:79). Anxiety, on the other hand, is a mood disturbance and a negative change of emotional tone, making the person fearful and hindering thinking, behaviour, and physiological activity. The anxious person will experience excessive worry and fatigue (Adwas et al, 2019:580-581).

By 2021, my mental illnesses triggered several negative, painful experiences. Additionally, I was facing multiple crossroads in my professional and personal life. Although I was performing well, my thoughts were negative, and I would spiral into thought patterns that would shatter my self-esteem. I would imagine the worst-case scenarios for perfectly handleable situations and catastrophised constantly. My emotional symptoms also included self-doubt, a lack of confidence, indecisiveness, panic attacks, and constant stress and worry. I put a lot of pressure on myself and overworked, double and triple-checking everything I did out of the fear that I had made a mistake. I began taking medication for anxiety and depression, respectively, with regular visits to my psychologist and psychiatrist. My symptoms of anxiety persisted for some

time – I would experience thoughts of failure but often had no energy to get things done. I would feel that I should be more active, but the idea of going into the world scared me, as I had social anxiety. I would get back from work, and time would stand still; I would get lost in my thoughts to the point where I could not move. My emotional symptoms of poor mental health would manifest physically – sweating and feeling unease in my body. It was painful to exist without participating wholeheartedly in life. I constantly grieved the loss of joy. I did not – could not – enjoy anything that I used to enjoy. Not even morning coffee.

During this time in my life, I was confronted with decisions in my personal and professional life that would change the way I experienced the world. I began asking myself questions I had never thought of before and did not know the answers to. I could feel myself outgrowing who and where I was in the face of change. My experiences were changing me, and my perception of myself and what I could offer the world was evolving. With this said, the emotional turmoil I was experiencing forced me to re-learn who I was, and the unknown supplied me with new meanings and the will to figure it out.

I anticipated that I was on the verge of undergoing tremendous change, which scared me. This led to an emotional shift; I yearned to be hurt physically because I could not express the emotional pain any other way. I could feel myself undergoing significant change, and I gravitated towards acquiring tattoos symbolically to navigate this period of struggle and memorialise myself in that moment. These encompassed positive aspects of my life and visually communicated who I was then, and who I felt I was becoming during that turbulent time. This symbolic play and the act of tattooing became a grief and healing ritual and a tool to express and alleviate my emotional pain to heal and move forward. Through the ritual of tattooing, I could physically materialise the emotional pain I was experiencing at the time.

A memorial is something which has been done or created in memory of someone who has passed (Bergh, 2016:586). At age 18 (2012), I acquired my first tattoo: my father's name in his handwriting – a permanent, symbolic memorial (Figure 1). Even though he passed away before I could remember him, acquiring a tattoo in his memory assisted me with healing from my loss when I approached adulthood.



Figure 1: Artist unknown. 2012. *Jeremy Tattoo*.
Ink in skin.

The grief and healing ritual of tattooing refers to the deliberate and symbolic act of adorning one's body with permanent ink, wherein the process and outcome hold profound personal significance (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:4; Bergh, 2016:590). In my body of work and research, I explore how my experience of tattooing has acted as a grief and healing ritual for me, observing the selection of meaningful symbols on my body thus engaging with pain as a transformative experience.

1.2. Research Goals

This practice-based study aims to visually explore how tattooing functions as a grief and healing ritual. The research is rooted in my lived experience of using tattooing as a therapeutic tool to alleviate emotional turmoil when undergoing anxious and depressive episodes during a turbulent time in my life. As my tattoos acquired during this time are heavily symbolic and pertain to objects, people, experiences, and ideas, I aim to examine the symbolism in the art of contemporary tattooing, and how my lived experience with symbolic visual narratives influenced (and continues to influence) my healing. As emotional and physical pain are entwined in this research, I aim to investigate the relationship between the physical pain of getting tattooed and the mental pain of emotional distress. Additionally, I aim to explore how personal background and social context shape tattoo stories; by considering my own identity and historical setting, I connect with wider social experiences.

1.3. Research Methodology

Using a qualitative research method my practice-based research employs an autoethnographic approach. I visually explore my experiences in hindsight using various materials and art-making practices to understand tattooing as a grief and healing ritual.

1.3.1. Research Approach

I use an autoethnographic approach to study my experiences with tattooing as a healing and grief ritual, combining autobiography and ethnography within my social identity (Ellis et al., 2011:273-275). Here, social and cultural identity refers to the experience, performance, and negotiation of social identifications by people within a certain setting (Chen et al. 2016:1). Autoethnographic writing challenges binaries between the individual and social, the body and mind, and lived experience and theory in academic work (Gannon, 2006: 475-476). My body, emotions, and lived experiences are “texts” as sources of information which have been incorporated in this autoethnographic study as a way of approaching the social significance of this research (Gannon, 2006:474-475). I have documented my experiences by adapting and designing traditional American tattoos¹ in a journal. These are selected and adapted into artworks.

As people identify with groups, they experience, perform, and negotiate multiple cultural identities at once (Chen et al. 2016:1). How I experience various social interactions with people around me varies depending on the context, the problem at hand, and the people involved. Instead of initially undergoing these experiences for research, I connect them with hindsight (Ellis et al., 2011:275). Social constructivism asserts that people understand the world individually through the development of subjective meanings which they gain from their experiences (Creswell et al., 2018:60). As such, this research relies on my perspective of situations and events, and subjective meanings which are manifested socially through interactions with others (Creswell et al., 2018:60). As my background has influenced my interpretations, I have focused on specific contexts of

¹ The first electronic tattoo machine was invented in 1891 in New York and allowed the user to utilise multiple needles at once. This led to the Americana tattoo style with strong lines (usually in black), solid shading, and bold colour (DeMello, 2000:50).

experiences related to grief and healing, placing myself in the centre of the research to draw upon my personal, historical, and cultural experiences (Creswell et al., 2018:60).

I acknowledge that various modes of body modification exist. These modes of body modification include and are not limited to tattooing, scarification, piercing, and aesthetic surgery (Cereda, 2013:450). These have been explored by other scholars in their works, relating to cultural or personal experiences. Scarification is a way of permanently marking the body by cutting or branding the skin and manipulating how the body heals. These constitute intricate and delicate patterns over large areas of the body (author unknown, 2011). An example of scarification can be seen in the Luluwa people of Congo where geometric scarification designs are considered “marks as civilisation” to be fully respected and celebrated (cited from Vogal 1988:97 in Petridis 2001:245). However, this research focuses specifically on tattooing due to my experiences with them.

My history with tattoos aligns with the idea of personal meaning construction. My tattoos are grounded in personal symbolism and assign significance to the consequences of loss along with personal and social changes in the context of my lived experiences (Neimeyer et al., 2002:235). I view the tattoo ritual as creating meaning and transforming emotional pain into the physical relief of pain. My research draws upon my experiences as someone who has undergone the tattoo ritual multiple times, acknowledging the interpretative nature of constructivism. Embracing subjectivity and allowing for diverse and layered interpretations, this research approach recognises that tattooing as a healing and grief ritual holds multiple meanings for me.

1.3.2. Research Techniques

As I have employed reflexivity, observation and memory to analyse this period in my life, I have observed my experiences with anxiety, depression, tattoo rituals, and the embodiment of pain and symbolism.

As constructivism influences and informs understandings of grief, it draws attention to how meaning-making assists the bereaved to adapt (Gillies et al. 2006:31). Constructivism is the actions, interactions, and perceptions we have that shape reality (Theys, 2018). Qualitative research encompasses research methodologies which

“describe and explain persons’ experiences, behaviours, interactions and social contexts” without numeral quantification (Fossey et al., 2002:717). Here, data collection can be first-person recollections of experience as autobiographical accounts, and creative endeavours for deriving subjective descriptions (Fossey et al., 2002:727). Conducting this autoethnographic research, my lived experiences and memories are stored in my body, and writing from memory is developed in my body (Gannon, 2006:490).

These recollections inform my practice. Practice-based research focuses on the creative process and the artworks that are created through this process (Candy et al., 2018:63). The artworks as artefacts are important in the “new understandings about practice” that surface as a result, creating a dynamic in which practice and research operate together to produce new knowledge (Candy et al., 2018:63). This methodology offers a way of exploration which operates in a personal capacity and contributes to the “wider picture” (Candy et al., 2018:63).

I simultaneously make use of theoretical analysis, journaling, and artmaking to inform each other. To do this, I research theoretical literature about themes of pain, identity, symbolism, and the art of tattooing as a grief and healing ritual. This informs both the visual research and my journaling, allowing me to better understand my past situations and the memories they created when I notice narratives in the texts that are similar to my own experiences. Symbolic portrayals of these personal narratives are translated into tattoo designs and can be seen in mediums across my work. In this way, I apply my lived experiences to shape my practical work.

I have utilised my memory to explore intense events and situations by keeping a journal of symbolic tattoos inspired by my history with mental illness. These situations have been observed and explored with the engagements and contributions of others in mind who were important figures in my life at the time (Ellis et al., 2011:275; 276). In this way, my research focuses on my interactions with others, the social contexts in which I found myself and my individual perceptions.

This visual research is reflexive, documenting my life changes through my biography, shared experiences, and personal memoirs. As such, my background experiences

become the focus of this research (Ellis et al., 2011:278). The creative practice nature of this research has encouraged me to observe my subjective history and create new visual work which relies on both journalling and theoretical research to better understand themes of pain, change, and symbolism.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review focuses on four main elements of interest within this research. This includes the ritualistic nature of tattooing, how emotional and physical pain pertains to the tattoo ritual, how symbolism is significant in this process, and what this inherently means for the social identity of the tattooee.

2.1. The Grief and Healing Ritual of Tattooing

Grief is a provoked process in response to losses such as death, unexpected life events, and changes, causing trauma to the bereaved. Common reactions to grief include high levels of anxiety and distress, changes in appetite, insomnia, and feelings of isolation and helplessness (Pop-Jordanova, 2021:9). Ritual is a significant aspect of grief and healing. Rituals rely on the symbolic, which includes objects and actions to meet the emotional needs of the bereaved (Sas et al. 2016:2). Usually, symbolic objects are items such as wedding rings and letters from lost loved ones, which can play roles in rituals, including grief rituals (Sas et al. 2016:7). Acquiring and living with a tattoo symbolic of a loss one has experienced can act in similar ways.

Tattoos, when used as therapy-based objects, can facilitate shifts in consciousness by enabling emotional changes through their physical manipulation (Sas et al., 2016:12). Ritualists often choose "pre-existing symbolic possessions" that are deeply symbolic and valued, representing either the relationship with the lost loved one or who the bereaved person was before the loss (Sas et al., 2016:12). These symbols serve to solidify and validate the relationship between the tattooee and the deceased, encouraging remembrance, emotional expression, and connection (Sas et al., 2016:7).

“[Memorial tattoos] are bodily objects, through which the bereaved claims ownership of the circumstances and agency to confront the passivity of loss, which ensure public communication and maintenance of the ongoing relationship with the departed” (Sas et al. 2016:7-8).

Acquiring memorial tattoos is a “ritualistic grief medium” as individuals mark their bodies with individual stories in a way that lasts, alleviates grief, and validates the experience of loss (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:4). Memorial tattoos portray personal and emotional elements and “mark upon the skin their permanent landscape of loss”

(Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:5). Swann-Thomas et al (2021) consider how loss means permanent separation. In contrast, tattoos are permanent, unlike our existence and the relationships we form, offering us constancy and stability. These tattoos can help the bereaved by changing their attachments, acting as therapeutic tools that empower tattooees to transition from an anguished state to a place of acceptance (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:5). Here, the tattoo process is thought of as a cathartic element of the memorialisation process and is used to bring emotions of loss to the surface so that one can confront them and heal from the pain of loss (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:5). Getting a tattoo allows tattooees to feel and manage the pain of grief in a different way. The physical pain from the tattoo can help process the emotional pain caused by grief. (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:6). This creates a personal meaning-making ritual and becomes a coping mechanism because it allows the “emotional pain of grief to be transformed into a physical pain” (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:15).

Memorial tattoos serve as social instruments that initiate conversations about loss, enabling individuals to communicate their grief and include others in the collective process of validating their experience (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:6; Crompton et al., 2021:1244). Memorial tattoos may be visual illustrations of the bonds that exist between the living and the deceased and affirm this connection (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:7).

Rituals are symbolic actions which are used by people to communicate messages through various symbols (Platvoet, 2006:200). Tattoos are created as the tattoo artist follows a sequence of steps and the result can be a physical mark of significant events that happened in one’s life, functioning as a means of identification (Bergh, 2016:585-586). Tattoos remain the same and are a way of committing to something stable and permanent while recording who and what you are at the time of getting the tattoo (Bergh, 2016:588). As a means of personal branding, tattoos evoke emotional reactions but simultaneously focus on the interpersonal communication, self-image, and self-worth of the tattooee (Bergh, 2016:590). Tattoos achieve this by making the tattooee more memorable to others and adding a distinctive touch which enables one to develop a narrative about the person and their life, evoking emotional inter-personal reactions (Bergh, 2016:590).

Choosing to be tattooed can be an act of reclaiming control of a traumatic experience in a controlled environment, fostering healing following the trauma, and using the tattoo symbol to narrate the traumatic memory (Crompton et al., 2021: 1244). In this case, one tattoos their body through a process which creates meaning and is determined by their psychological reactions, social exchanges, and cultural narratives in which trauma is formed (Crompton et al., 2021:1242). Trauma often gives way to symptoms of anxiety and depression, and a tattoo can act as a site of affirmations to form a creative instrument for self-expression (Crompton et al., 2021:1244). In this way, tattoos could serve as an effective platform to psychologically “integrate” the impact of the trauma by having the person physically re-experience it through the tattoo process, providing a vessel for deeper comprehension through the body in a controlled environment (Crompton et al., 2021:1244). The tattooing process has served as a therapeutic tool to move through challenges with mindfulness. The notion of this physicality introduces the components of emotional and physical pain, and how they together inform tattooing as a grief and healing ritual.

2.2. Emotional and Physical Pain and Healing

When considering pain, one should acknowledge the role that the social context of the painful experience plays in this experience. The context in which pain is experienced influences the perception of the threat that the painful sensation is associated with (Nicholas et al., 2017:993). Painful experiences involve our bodies and how they pertain to our surroundings on a physical and social level (Stanier, 2021:112). These experiences are layered with complicated intersubjective meanings (Stanier et al., 2021:101). Following this idea, pain could be deeply ingrained in an individual’s sense of bodily self in many ways.

Pain is a protective strategy that occurs in the wake of continuous communication between the body and the world, and a “defensive action operating in the context of a certain threat” (Tabor et al., 2017:1007). Perception is “embodied” – the product of inferences that are drawn from sensory input and bodily states, which depend on the given environmental context (Nicholas et al., 2017:993). As perception is both embodied and embedded, our experiences come from how we interact with the world. ‘Embedded’ here refers to our interactions with the environment in a specific place and time, while

‘embodied’ emphasises that our cognition extends beyond the brain because bodies play a central role in constructing experiences. Pain influences how we interact with and perceive our environment, continuously reshaping our understanding of pain through this interaction. Pain is the product of an evolved, learned, and threat-defined context as the body, the brain, and the world are connected and shape how pain is experienced (Tabor et al., 2017:1007).

We interpret our experiences by creating details that prioritise efficiency over accuracy, based on our predictions (Tabor et al., 2017:1007). Our understanding of the world comes from the interaction between our actions and the predictions of their consequences, constantly reshaping how we experience pain (Tabor et al., 2017:1007). While pain is often viewed as a phenomenon occurring in the brain, it arises from the sensorimotor interactions we have with the world. Pain can profoundly impact the way we engage with our surroundings and what we perceive them to offer (Tabor et al., 2017:1007).

“[Pain is] a distressing experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage with sensory, emotional, cognitive, and social components” (Williams, 2016:157, cited by Nicholas et al, 2017:993).

Spiritual pain can be thought of in terms of the past (painful memories and guilt), the present (anger and isolation), and the future (fear and hopelessness) (Brunjes, 2010:32). When experiencing this anguish, the personal belief system of the individual is being tested and they can feel a sense and reality of loss, including the loss of a sense of identity (Brunjes, 2010:33). In this case, healing can take place when the person is assisted in finding new meaning in the next phase of their life. This is usually done through what Brunjes (2010: 35) refers to as a “life review,” where the person remembers the past and brings a sense of it into the present. Doing this helps the person interpret the suffering in the context of their life and find a release which may increase their confidence and ability to cope with the present difficulties.

Three activities of meaning reconstruction are involved in the grieving process: the making of sense, the finding of benefit, and a change of identity (Gillies et al. 2006:31). Frankl (1962, cited in Gilles et al. 2006:31) argued that people are driven and encouraged

by a psychological need to find or create meaning and purpose in their lives and that this powers their ability to rise above even the direst of experiences (Gillies et al. 2006:31).

“By engaging in interpretations and evaluations that focus on benefits and lessons learned, survivors emphasise benevolence over malevolence, meaningfulness over randomness, and self-worth over self-abasement” (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, cited in Gillies et al. 2006:35).

People often reassert a sense of their purpose or control when confronted with distressing and disrupting events in their lives. In doing so, they may seek to change their life structures to accommodate the event to see it in a positive way, or a starting point to achieve new goals (Gillies et al. 2006:35). This cognitive strategy is a hopeful one, because it would be easy to dismiss sadness as meaningless suffering, but the person is allowed to face the negative situation with dignity because the suffering comes to carry meaning and purpose (Gillies et al. 2006:35). Adaptive cognitions in the face of death and loss could be optimism that enables the person to maintain a positive attitude about who they are, continue to care for others, create, work, grow, and self-actualise (Gillies et al. 2006:35). Engaging in enjoyable activities, setting new goals, and developing a changing identity are effective coping methods for meaning reconstruction (Gillies et al. 2006:48). The key meaning-making processes are sense making, benefit finding, and experiencing a change of identity (Gillies et al. 2006:54). The bereaved can engage in meaning reconstruction with these three processes in which meaning structures can be reviewed or rebuilt and help them make sense of the situation and alleviate some distress (Gillies et al. 2006:54).

Arising from a network of social and cultural relations, pain is involved with modes of pleasure and displeasure; it enacts personal meaning and provides context (Stanier et al., 2021:101). Most bodily pains are not dependent on previously experienced pleasures. Accepting pain and acting against our instincts to avoid it is referred to as “sublime pain” by Fayyaz (2011:144). Positive and negative physical pains differ in nature. Positive pains and pleasures are independent feelings that can be experienced on their own, while negative pains or pleasures occur only after the opposite sensation is removed (Fayyaz, 2011:144). As pain is rooted in self-preservation; if something is painful it may also appear dangerous. On the contrary, pleasure is often associated with

safety (Fayyaz, 2011:145). Accepting pain and acting against our instincts to avoid it is referred to as “sublime pain” by Fayyaz (2011:144). This may apply to the pain acceptance that comes with tattooing. There are some instances in the tattooing process when I find the pain to be enjoyable, and times when I do not. Upon experiencing the levels of pain that come with tattooing, I am left with permanent, meaningful, and symbolic art on my body.

2.3. Symbolism in Contemporary Tattoo Art

People perceive and learn about the world through language and meaning-making, relying on the symbolic to do so (Zhirenov et al., 2016:2841). According to Hall, representation is “the production of meaning through language” where signs are organised into different languages to communicate with others (1997:28). As language uses signs to symbolise things, meaning is created within language (Hall, 1997:28). Signs possess meaning because people have codes to translate concepts into language. These codes are imperative for meaning and representation because they are a result of social practices which people learn through culture (Hall, 1997:28-29). This constructivist approach to language and meaning leans on symbolism as signs, and speaks to social identity (Hall, 1997:29). Symbols mediate images and contain hidden meanings and concepts (Zhirenov et al., 2016:2842). Symbolic names of objects depend on human cognition and experiences, as objects derive their symbolic meaning from their impact on humanity, conveying allegorical thoughts (Zhirenov et al., 2016:2842-2843). Symbols do not directly describe objects but imbue them with meanings, conveying this through allegory (Zhirenov et al., 2016:2846). The symbolic names of objects in the world are dependent on people and their cognitive energies and experiences because objects get their symbolic meaning from their unique influences on humankind (Zhirenov et al., 2016:2842).

Tattoos as signs on the body are structures made up of multiple levels (Kovala, 2014:161). A tattoo is an independent and secured unit on the body, and this structure lends the context for its interpretation of meaning, which is autonomous (Kovala, 2014:162). Considering contextualism as the theory that the tattoo as a sign is a compelling and closed context that cannot be condensed to a previously held context,

tattoos should not be limited as the power of an image on the skin is to “familiarise” and “defamiliarise” simultaneously (Kovalá, 2014:162).

[The] provision of symbols and outlets to focus thoughts, feeling and behaviours [such as] symbolic objects, gestures and language assign a physical, tangible form to feelings that would otherwise seem esoteric, abstract or undefinable” (Daniel, 2021:2).

Important to the symbolic is the notion of conceptualism. Conceptualism draws attention to the technique of abstraction to encourage thought; the artist can portray scenes with objects and people, creating an intended message using association through symbolism (MacBean, 2013:5-6). Here, the artist selects imagery from a variety of sources and merges them, creating a new piece (MacBean, 2013:6). Symbolic artworks usually aim at attracting viewers who seek to answer questions (MacBean, 2013:9). Symbolism as a technique may be used in many different styles of art and can be a tool with which to communicate across many mediums of artmaking such as painting, sculpture, digital art, and body art (MacBean, 2013:9).

Tattooing focuses on artistic expression and the representation of autonomy and individuality (McCandlish et al, 2023:217). There exists an appreciation of tattoos in Western contemporary society in which tattoos resonate greatly with personal narratives. Tattoos can reinforce the development of meaning-making and can act as a tool to share stories and promote healing in the wake of deep distress (McCandlish et al, 2023:218). According to Khoury (2020) in McCandlish et al (2023:218), this process of developing narratives benefits mental well-being and recovery from mental health issues. Tattoos are an expression of one’s relationship with oneself and with others and a symbol of change.

Tattoos are instruments I use as stories in the skin. When considering how mental health and tattoos interact, it is important to observe the relationship between the body as a vehicle, and the sense of self that everyone possesses: the body is simultaneously a public and private space (McCandlish et al, 2023:223). Tattoos may symbolise underlying psychodynamic processes like condensation and displacement, where emotions are transferred from one object, person, or experience onto the tattoo. In this way, tattoos can serve as a means of making hidden traumas visible. The expression of

these narratives can be especially important for people who feel that they have lost significant parts of their identity, and so acquiring a tattoo can signify an attempted transformation of a painful story into one of agency and recovery (McCandlish et al, 2023:223).

The visual narrative of a tattoo is information that can be translated into subjective meanings which can then be shared with others (Davidson, 2017:34). Sharing meaning is significant to people who are grieving because they are preserving, continuing, and sharing bonds which they value (Davidson, 2017:34). Tattoos possess communicative value and should be acknowledged as a form of non-verbal communication, and as a type of body language used “intersubjectively” by social and emotional connection, making them social acts (Bergh, 2016:585). The creativity and innovation manifested in tattoos are for the preservation of the self, and the celebration of memories, art, and permanence (Bergh, 2016:595). Tattoos are both a public and private act, and by sharing stories of tattoo experiences we rotate between personalised meanings and the reactions of those around us (Patterson et al., 2010:256). Memorial tattoos possess an emotional power as they can represent profound human experiences and open dialogue because it is more socially acceptable to talk about visual images than the death and grief that resulted in the need to get the tattoo. In this sense, tattoos can translate an experience of sadness and loss into a visual language which is better understood by those around us.

Humans respond to grief on a symbolic level, assigning significance to the signs of separation that are experienced in addition to the changes in personal and collective identity (Neimeyer et al., 2002:235). When I undergo times of loss, I gravitate toward the search for meaning in the world around me. There is a distinctive tendency to “construct a symbolic universe superimposed over a natural one” which makes our adaption to loss and death a distinctly human one (Neimeyer et al., 2002:248). Symbolism is closely tied to identity in tattoo practice as body art represents personal meanings, beliefs, and experiences. My tattoos are saturated with symbolic meanings which evolve and transform as time passes and I experience the world; the good and the bad. Meaning is not only focused on beliefs and interpretation; it is also shaped by language, cultural practices, and spiritual traditions. These elements all contribute to how individuals or

groups understand and experience mourning (Neimeyer et al., 2002:248). Tattoos as symbols embody aspects of one's cultural background, values, or connections, creating a visual narrative as the tattoos communicate and reinforce social identity to oneself and others.

2.4. The Intersection of Social Identity and Tattoos

Identity is unique to each person, a struggle for self-determination, and something that forms part of a broader collective – that of a wider identity (Buckingham 2008:1). People adopt multiple identifications with others on the grounds of social and cultural factors including shared values, histories, and interests (Buckingham, 2008:1). A broad body of work has been conducted on identity formation regarding individual and group identity by scholars such as Richard Jenkins (b. 1952) and Erving Goffman (b. 1922). These processes work at both individual and social levels. A person may make claims about their identity – like acquiring a tattoo – but those claims need to be acknowledged by others. In looking to define identity, people try to assert their individuality but also join others in the community to support their self-esteem or status. This often involves the process of stereotyping or “cognitive simplification” that lets people differentiate between the self and others, and define themselves in encouraging ways (Buckingham, 2008:6).

A tattoo cannot be reduced to a symbolic representation of the truth; tattoos are interactive. They should be considered a process whereby a person's identity and how their experiences construct meaning are mediated by their social interactions (Crompton et al., 2021:1244).

“Tattooing has been conceptualised as a practice of identity formation that intervenes in the personal and social realms, making the personal visible to a broader public and rendering it an object of transformation and negotiation by various actors” (Crompton et al., 2021:1244).

Tattoos are possessions that remain on the body for all life. Possessions may embody memories, feelings, and experiences that fortify identity and connect our sense of past and history (Velliquette, 1998:3). Possession is an extension of us and if the inner self is known to the subject alone, possessions could symbolise the self to others (Velliquette, 1998:3). Tattoos may symbolise group membership, activities and interests,

relationships, life transitions, achievements, and values which are symbolic of life experiences and identity (Velliquette, 1998:3). Tattoos can speak about identity features. These non-verbal signs as symbols on the body are discursive as they communicate individual and group identity. The tattoo can be seen as a “creative extension of the self” if the “construction of subjectivity can be viewed as a work of art” (Velliquette, 1998:2). To select a permanent symbol of self means a certain risk is at stake, and this could lead to dissatisfaction (Velliquette, 1998:2). If the self is correctly represented and communication is strong, the experience of being tattooed may become habitual (Velliquette, 1998:2).

Although tattoos have deep personal meaning for tattooees, these meanings are often based on cultural practice and underpinnings (Velliquette, 1998:3). As people are placed in a greater number of social groups and change or adjust their persona to fit each, these people may try to reclaim their sense of self-ownership by permanently marking their bodies with symbolic representations of personally significant experiences, memories, interests, and beliefs (Cesare, 2011:2).

Symbolic interactionism is the notion that a person’s concept of self is cultivated through processes of social interaction (Cesare, 2011:9). The social being and the person are essentially the same, but they develop separately through the exchange of ideas and communication within society (Cesare, 2011:9-10). Symbolic interactionists hold that people learn more about others by watching their behaviour in social situations, and by doing so we learn more about ourselves (Cesare, 2011:9). Watching others helps us understand our feelings and recognise the impact of our actions (Cesare, 2011:10). Identities are shaped by subjective belief systems, and people often feel pressured to conform to these categories to build connections and enhance their self-image (Cesare, 2011:11). Social identity theory provides a dynamic and widely applicable framework for understanding identity development, as it connects social and individual cognitive processes (Cesare, 2011:11). Tattooing and identity both involve permanent categorisation, with social identity playing a significant role in self-identification (Cesare, 2011:11). I would not be tattooed today if I did not enjoy seeing them on others. I often saw tattooed people in Cape Town. I felt especially intrigued by the colours, linework, texts, and shapes of American traditional pieces, understanding them through my

narratives. It is in this way that the tattoo ritual is made of various aspects of physicality, emotional vulnerability, symbolic significance, and, in turn, identity change.

2.5. Summary

This chapter has outlined and discussed the interplay between the ritualistic nature of tattooing, the dynamics of emotional and physical pain, the symbolic, and the implications for social identity. This exploration highlights how acquiring a tattoo within a certain setting, especially memorial tattoos, serves as a grief and healing ritual. This action allows individuals the opportunity to process the change, validate and preserve relationships with what was lost, and foster emotional expression for personal growth. Through the act of tattooing and the inherent construction of meaning, pain is transformed and offers a pathway to healing and identity reinforcement. The chapter also delves into the symbolic value of tattoos, emphasising their role in personal narratives and social communication.

The physical manipulation of tattooing in the skin can enable a change of consciousness as the tattoo becomes a valued possession on the body, representing personal narratives of loss (Sas et al., 2016:12). These can assist bereaved individuals to alter their attachments and the way they remember certain events, and reach a state of acceptance, capturing personal meaning (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:5; Bergh, 2016:585-586). This chapter has explored the dual nature of pain—both emotional and physical—and how it informs the tattooing process as a grief and healing ritual. The way pain is experienced during the tattoo ritual is layered with meaning and is often dependent on the environment in which the pain is being experienced; the sensation of the tattoo ritual allows the emotions of the loss to surface and be confronted (Stanier et al., 2021:101, Nicholas et al., 2017:993, Swann-Thomas et al., 2017:5).

Through symbolic imagery that holds personal significance, individuals communicate their lived experiences, connecting their inner experiences with the outer world on an interpersonal level (Bergh, 2016:590). These tattoos not only serve as permanent reminders of change but also as social instruments that facilitate conversations about loss and grief, allowing for the sharing of experiences and the reinforcement of social

bonds and self-expression. This literature review has served to outline the relationships between these themes and is the point of departure for my visual enquiry.

Chapter Three: Tattoo in the Works of Viale and Barber

My work is underpinned and influenced by the work of Fabio Viale (b. 1975) and Shawn Barber (b. 1970). This chapter will review selected artworks by Viale and Barber to benchmark and inform my studio practice.

3.1. Fabio Viale

Fabio Viale's work depicts classically inspired sculptures which are influenced by varying modern tattoo styles. Viale creates large marble sculptures of human forms with hand-painted "tattoos" displayed in bold pigments on the body (Figure 2) (Neria, 2020; Taggart, 2020). His work expresses the "poetics of displacement" and "intends to create a fracture" (Viale cited in Neira, 2020). Due to the composition of the marble, the ink used for the tattoos infiltrates into the marble like ink into the skin during the tattooing process. Viale (cited in Neria, 2020) states that he does this to execute a more realistic method of mark-making on the marble.



Figure 2: Fabio Viale. 2022. *Door Release*. Ink on marble.

Viale is interested in art historical figures, such as the mysteries surrounding Leonardo di Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, the survival of these historical periods, and the symbolic imagery associated with them. The iconographies used within his sculptures are both recognised broadly as symbolic imagery and acknowledged in tattoo culture. Some of the tattoos are representative of criminality and are filled with symbols that derive from the idea of a meeting between life and death (Viale cited in Neira, 2020).

Viale's *Lacocounte*, a historical figure, in Figure 3, is tattooed with an adaptation of Giovanni da Modena's *Dantesque Hell* which illustrates hell. In doing so, Viale aims to raise awareness and encourage a discussion about the hatred that manifests and grows when we categorise one another as 'other' and judge each other based on our differences (Viale, 2024).

As Viale discusses otherness and invites conversations about mental health, his work uses the body in somewhat uncomfortable and deliberate ways, as seen in his pieces *Door Release* (Figure 2), *Lacocounte* (Figure 3), and *David Souvenir* (Figure 4). Viale told Taggart (2020) that he is interested in tattoos that discuss life and death while employing ancient symbology which has resisted time to challenge the idea of ancient statues by adding the modern influence of body art.



Figure 3: Fabio Viale. 2018. *Lacocounte*. Ink on marble.

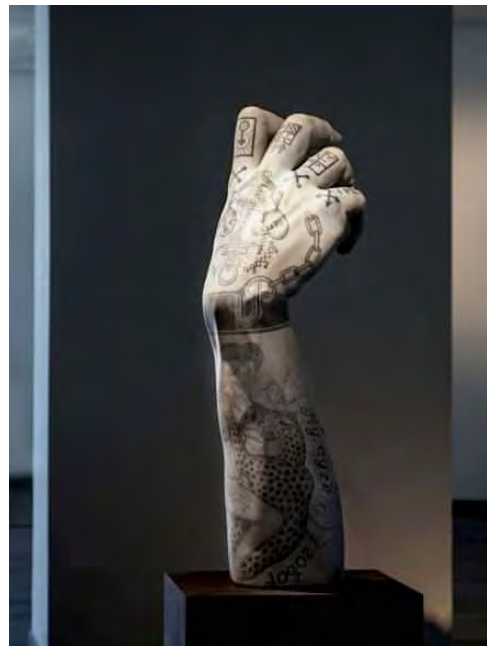


Figure 4: Fabio Viale. 2015. *David Souvenir*. Ink on marble.

3.2. Shawn Barber

While being an oil painter, Barber is also a practising tattoo artist. Barber's paintings focus on portraiture painting and the documentation of contemporary tattoo culture. In his work, he documents established historical figures in the tattoo industry including show performer Horace Ridler (b. 1882) and tattoo artist Ralph Johnstone (b. 1902), the culture and history of tattooism, and the settings of modern-day tattoo studios and tattoo practices (Barber, 2024.). The figures in his work are people who craft images embodying the beliefs of those who receive tattoos and honour the memory of loved ones. This is deeply rooted in the social nature of humanity (Joruk, 2024).

Barber's self-portraits (Figure 5) visually explore his personal experiences with tattoo culture as a painter and tattoo artist. His paintings capture tattooing from a personal perspective as Barber reflects upon his experiences within the tattoo discipline, sharing his personal and intimate knowledge of the tattoo medium (Joruk, 2024). His portrayals of tattoo culture are materialised with broad, loose brush strokes, winding linework, bright colours, meticulous detail, and dripping paint (Figure 6). Barber exhibits a variety of technical skills to paint figures, the interior of tattoo studios, and still life tattoo paraphernalia, often employing realism in his work (Figures 7 and 8).



Figure 5: Shawn Barber. 2010. *Self Portrait at 39*. Mixed media on canvas.



Figure 6: Shawn Barber. 2015. *Portrait of the Artist, Marcus Pacheo, Hands Study 1*. Mixed media on canvas.



Figure 7: Shawn Barber. 2022. *'Dan Sinnes' Turtle Vase Still Life*. Oil on linen panel.



Figure 8: Shawn Barber. 2021. *Luke Atkinson's Doc Forest Machine, 3 Views*. Oil on linen panel.

3.3. Summary

Viale and Barber are similar in that both their work focuses on tattoo culture. Barber's work often features tattoo-inspired portraits and scenes, celebrating tattoo art as a tool for self-expression and identity construction. Viale's work also engages with tattoo culture but uses a different medium to do so as his work juxtaposes marble – a classical art medium – with contemporary tattoo art. The human body is a central theme in their work; as Barber focuses on painting people who are heavily tattooed, I believe his work encourages conversations about body art and identity. On the other hand, Viale's work explores the human body as classical sculptures which are representations of the body. It could be argued that both these artists combine classical and contemporary elements, with Barber employing classical figurative skills in his work with tattoo art, and Viale incorporating classical sculpture with tattoos. Both Viale and Barber depict tattooed people with varying body art styles, but their work with the American traditional tattoo style has influenced my work in various ways; the American traditional style of tattooing has strongly influenced how I designed and executed my artworks.

Chapter Four: *It's Not Gonna be Lekker: A Visual Representation of Real-Life Tattoo Narratives*

This chapter documents and reflects on the practical and creative development of this study. The core themes of emotional and physical pain, individual and social identity, and the involvement of symbolism are unpacked in various practical series.

4.1. Casting Rubber

“Skin is both inside and outside, facilitating movement between internal and external worlds” (Patterson et al., 2010:255).

Tattoos change how the body looks, and they change as the body changes. As the tattoo is part of the self, the tattoo may be symbolic of that self to others (Patterson et al., 2010:255). Using casting rubber and a palette knife, I attempted to recreate my skin. I applied the substance layer by layer on a window in my studio to better understand casting rubber’s transparency and the way it aged. I used acrylic and oil paints to discolour the rubber and recreate the tattoos I had acquired (Figures 9 and 10). The application of the paint was disrupted by the grooves and texture of the rubber, and I could not achieve the level of detail that I felt was imperative. Once removed from the window, the casting rubber would crumble easily. I concluded that this medium was unsuccessful, and instead chose to focus on paper, canvas, resin, and video media.



Figure 9: Studio practice process. Mixed media on casting rubber.



Figure 10: Detail image of Figure 9.

4.2. Tattoo Journal: Reflecting and Organising to Create

Throughout this study, I have kept a visual journal in which I record my personal experiences as symbolic tattoo designs (Figure 11). This method is much like the way I acquire tattoos and process pain in that these designs are tangible expressions of inner pain and act to externalise and confront my emotions. As tattooing offers a controlled form of physical pain, I consciously determine the designs that represent my emotions as I take agency over the healing process, like how I use tattoos to gain control of my trauma. This is symbolic in that by recording my experiences as symbolic designs, I create a visual language for my emotional state and continue bonds with my past experiences.



Figure 11: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. Tattoo journal designs. Mixed media on paper.

The purpose of this journal is to research, process, and understand my triggers, emotions and experiences through reflection and observation of anxiety and depression – both positive and negative ones. By drawing these designs, I acknowledge my pain and growth as ongoing elements of my identity and preserve connections with significant emotions and experiences. I create custom symbols by collecting and combining traditional American tattoo designs; the same style as most of my tattoos. I design these tattoos by

researching traditional American tattoos on various platforms and combine elements that resonate with me to create new tattoo designs. These tattoo designs are visual manifestations of my memories, experiences, thoughts, ideologies, and emotions from the beginning of the tattooing period, until now.

Drawings from this book have informed my research in both theoretical and studio practice spheres in that they have been selected and adapted into both a series of paintings and tattoo designs on sculptures of my body to inform my autoethnographic research.

4.3. Symbolic Trigger Series

The paintings in this series are inspired by my symbolic journaled tattoo designs which pertain to my positive and negative experiences – or ‘triggers’. My tattoos are done in the American traditional tattoo style with bold, black outlines, strong but limited colour, and iconic imagery such as a skull, various botanical elements, and romantic imagery like roses and hearts. My relationship with tattooing is the theme of this body of work. Like Barber, tattoos have also influenced me in a personal, meaningful way. I have explored self-portraiture extensively in my research with both figurative and non-figurative work. The focus behind the self-portrait in Figure 14 was to start a dialogue, which began to visually communicate that a relationship exists between myself and my tattoos. I researched various tattoo portraits and, upon choosing a design to draw inspiration from (Figure 12), photographed myself facing the camera, looking directly into the lens. Considering the reference image and the image of my face, I began the process of creating a simple compositional drawing as seen in Figure 13. The image presents a similar stylisation of the hair, nose, eyes, eyelashes, lips, and red circles under the eyes. This ultimately resulted in a self-portrait painting (Figure 14) in which the face is shaped by a solid, consistent black line which is also used for the nose and eyes to imitate the thick, bold, black lines used in traditional American tattooing.



Figure 12: Artist and date unknown. Reference image.



Figure 13: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. Studio practice process. Mixed media on paper.



Figure 14: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *Symbol of the Self*. Mixed media on canvas.

Figure 15 depicts a traditional American tattoo-style drawing of two people shaking hands, which inspired the painting in Figure 16. This piece is symbolic of the significant influence my relationships with others have over me.

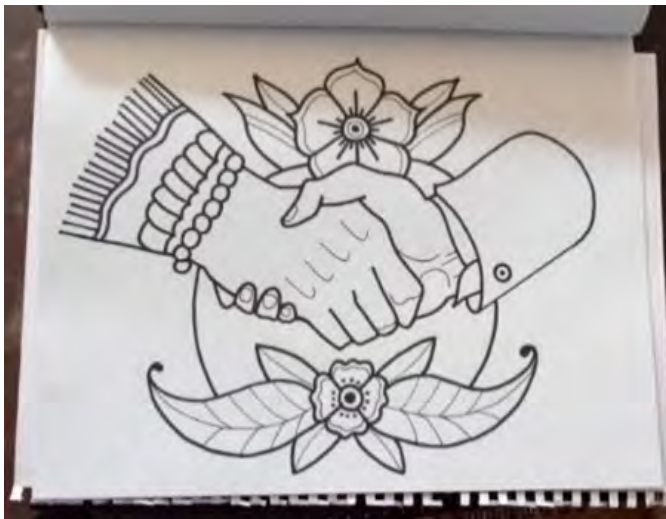


Figure 15: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2023. Tattoo journal design. Mixed media on paper.



Figure 16: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2023. *Relationships*. Mixed media on canvas.

As the quality of the relationships I had with others strengthened or weakened, my mental health would follow. Relationships make up a significant part of people's lives. As social beings, people can develop strong emotional ties with one another (Mertika et al., 2020:115). The importance of social relationships is established by the impact that interpersonal relationships have on both the physical health and general functioning of

people; those with better relationships experience better mental health and higher rates of happiness (Mertika et al., 2020:115). My relationships with others were significantly involved in the development, processing, and resolution of mental health difficulties. My emotional state would dip when I experienced turbulence in my relationships with the people in my life. I made some friends and lost others, and my mind would fluctuate accordingly. As such, my social life suffered because of my mental health which left me isolated and lonely. The journal drawing of a handless clock in Figure 17 is symbolic of how I felt during this time.



Figure 17: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. Tattoo journal design. Mixed media on paper.

The drawing above inspired the painting in Figure 18 which depicts a black, grey, and wooden pocket watch with no hands in the centre of the painting, surrounded with floral detail. The black and grey tones of the watch are representative of the dullness I experienced when doing things I used to enjoy. The wooden detail on which the numbers of the clock have been painted is symbolic of change and transformation. Wood can change as it ages and responds to its environment (Zhou, 2021). The floral details in this piece and throughout my body of practical work are reminiscent of gardens. I have spent a significant amount of time in gardens throughout my life – particularly during my childhood as my mother and grandmother were avid gardeners. I feel uplifted when I observe the breathtaking detail of various flowers and their leaves and focus on how the light touches them, their veins, their shapes, and their spectrum of colours.



Figure 18: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *Conversations with the Ceiling*. Mixed media on canvas.

Depression was, in my experience, an illness that eliminated joy and made time stand still. I experienced a persistent feeling of emptiness and periods where each day felt like a monotonous struggle, as though time was not progressing. My thinking patterns were generally negative, persistent, and repetitive, making it difficult to perceive time effectively. A clock with no hands is symbolic of my time with depression where it felt like I was ‘doing time’ in my mind. I would often stew in my negative thoughts, and when morning came, I would experience the same day again.

I found it liberating to evolve a simple drawing into a detailed image representative of my innermost feelings about mental distress. This alludes to the process of materialising an image on my body during the tattoo ritual; by painting this piece, I witnessed a basic but sentimental achromatic design evolve into a bright and meaningful piece.

Figure 19 depicts a life-size takeaway coffee cup. The coffee cup design has been portrayed in a way that represents the stencil used during the tattoo ritual, which is a temporary achromatic design that is applied to the skin. The coffee cup has a banner around it which reads, “Good Morning Anxiety”. The coffee cup and the phrase “Good Morning Anxiety” are representative of the mornings during that time when my anxiety would be particularly high. To me, the meaning of this painting is based on the fear associated with waking up and starting the day while struggling with mental health disorders.



Figure 19: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *Good Morning Anxiety*. Mixed media on canvas.

The cup is framed by achromatic floral designs in a print-like style, inspired by Aubrey Beardsley's 1894 piece, *How Sir Lancelot was Known by Dame Elaine* (Figure 20). I included this detail to frame the cup as the floral designs of Beardsley's piece resonate with similar botanical imagery in Figure 19. The background is a solid shade of deep lilac to symbolise luxury as purple has been historically associated with wealth and expensiveness (Cherry, 2024), considering the luxurious nature of store-bought coffee in the mornings.



Figure 20: Aubrey Beardsley. 1893-1894. *How Sir Lancelot was Known by Dame Elaine*. Line block illustration.

When people get less sleep than usual, their anxiety is likely to increase the following day (Cox et al., 2018:50). My anxiety was worse in the mornings. I would experience strong waves of nausea and catastrophised about the day ahead, which seemed to begin as I regained consciousness from nights of disturbed sleep. From this reoccurring over again, coffee is, to me, personally and symbolically linked with this time of the day and the sensations I would feel. A hot cup of coffee in the morning is synonymous with memories of me forcing myself out of bed to face the day with relentless symptoms of anxiety. I would arrive at work and the scent of roasted coffee beans would hit me immediately. I did not consume coffee every day as caffeine increases anxiety more in those who do not consume it regularly (Rogers et al., 2006:274). When this happens, it may cause some people to avoid drinks containing caffeine as it heightens their anxiety (Rogers et al., 2006:274).

By using an achromatic design of black and grey, I aim to evoke a sense of plainness which is like the feeling of emptiness or numbness often associated with anxiety. It removes life's vibrancy. This illustrates how mental illness eliminates the joy of ordinary experiences, like drinking coffee. The phrase "Good Morning Anxiety" in the banner around the cup juxtaposes the expectation of coffee as a positive product with my experience of it as a source of discomfort. This highlights the subjective nature of anxiety and how it can transform something culturally perceived as positive to a source of physical unease.

As my relationship with coffee changed, so did my relationship with food (Figure 21). During my time struggling with my mental health, food was often difficult to be around. At my worst, lunch breaks and dinners would be difficult to manage. Eating with others is a large part of community and belonging; communal eating provides both social and individual benefits (Dunbar, 2017:1). In line with this thinking, social eating facilitates social bonding. Those who eat with others are more satisfied with their lives, more trusting of others, and more involved with their local communities (Dunbar, 2017:1). I, on the other hand, became more isolated. I avoided social situations if they involved sit-down meals where I was expected to enjoy a meal in the company of others. This hindered my relationships and secluded me from many people in my life. I did not want to put myself in that situation or draw attention to myself. As my anxiety would at times

make my body feel uncomfortably warm when experiencing situations like this, I garnished the burger with a chilli to symbolise this sensation.



Figure 21: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *Where's Your Appetite?* Mixed media on canvas.

During this period, I had begun propagating *Monstera Deliciosa* plants in my spare time. I enjoyed watching them develop and identified them as a symbol of growth in my life at a time when I felt that my life was stagnant. When considering the background of this piece I observed monstera plants in my studio and incorporated them, flattening and styling them in an American traditional style. This emphasises the relatively realistic qualities of the hamburger in the foreground, which felt very real to me when I visited restaurants or the like.

The tattoos in my work have encouraged communication and open dialogue. It is more socially acceptable to talk about body art than it is to talk about grief, loss and death. In this way, memorial tattoos are better at engaging others in conversation about these topics (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:6). Although memorial tattoos are symbolic rather than verbal, they can open dialogue and initiate conversation (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:6). I believe my tattoos lend me permission to tell stories and discuss difficult life transitions openly. They also allow others to attach their personal narratives to them, understanding them in a way that reflects themselves.

As the tattoo designs signify certain happenings, they also symbolise stories of growth and recovery. Similarly, the process of initial sketching allowed me to explore and work through my thoughts, assisting me to understand and navigate personal changes. The series of symbolic trigger tattoo designs on canvas encourage conversations about topics such as relationships and social identity, changes in bodily experience when undergoing depressive and anxious periods, and the way this changed me as an individual. This is also evident in my use of self-portraiture which is a running theme in this research.

4.4. Self Portrait: A Construction of the Self

My body of practical work includes a self-portrait (Figure 22). This painting honestly details the tattoos visible on my body (Figure 23). Identity is always under construction and focuses on questions regarding personal development and social relationships (Buckingham, 2008:21). My tattooed body takes up a space as both subject and object. My tattoos are projections of my personality that render my body as an object that is subject to an external gaze (Patterson et al., 2010:256).



Figure 22. Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *You See Me, I See You*. Mixed media on canvas.



Figure 23: Detail image of Figure 22.

Observing Barber's work has made me more sensitive to scenes, objects, and interactions in tattoo culture. As Barber explored his relationship with tattoos on canvas by portraying himself with his body art visible, this self-portrait can be recognised as a "self-document" to "gain insight into the phenomenon" (Gorichanaz, 2019:1). It is a construction of myself rather than a depiction (Gorichanaz, 2019:1). Gorichanaz (2019:7) cites Maes (2015) in that an artwork is a portrait if the artist intended to create one and succeeded. Maes believes we do not need strict conditions to define a portrait and that this approach can include ideas from other philosophers. He suggests including "portrait-relevant features" like the subject's appearance, social status, and inner life. I have explored my relationship with tattoos using imagery of myself with my body art visible, and various elements of self-portraiture, including a recognisable portrayal of my physical body and my tattoos, a sense of my inner life (such as my watch on my left wrist, my jewellery, the background that was selected), and pose (Freeland, 2010, cited in Gorichanaz, 2015:6). This conveys my relationship with my tattoos and their symbolic significance as a representation of my emotions and experiences in my journey up to this point. Considering this idea, what makes an artwork a portrait can be directly related to a self-portrait comprising personal elements like my tattoos. I created a self-portrait to capture my identity. My tattoos – as elements of my identity and self-construction – represent "portrait-relevant features" (Maes, 2015, cited in Gorichanaz, 2019:6). They convey aspects of my appearance and personal stories about my inner life, making my self-portrait not just a visual representation but a deeper reflection of who I am.

During this time when I noticed that I was changing along with the course of my life, I experienced a heightened sense of depression, signified by hopelessness, confusion, and loneliness. The uncertainty seemed too overwhelming, and I realised I was approaching a challenging period. The application of the tattoos in the initial shock and denial phase of grief helped me confront the reality of my loss. There are various tattoos visible in the piece, the oldest being the piece of my father's name on my left outer wrist (Figure 24). Though I did not know my father, the tattoo of his name solidifies and validates the relationship that I have with him to encourage remembrance and the feeling of expression and emotion (Sas et al. 2016:7).



Figure 24: Detail image of Figure 22.

Years later when struggling with my mental health, I acquired various tattoos in quick succession. The first tattoo design I chose during this time was selected from a flash sheet by tattoo artist Caitlyn Long (b. 1991). The design of a woman's face with flowers in her hair (Figure 25), placed under my elbow, symbolises the strong women who are close to me.



Figure 25: Detail image of Figure 22.

I chose additional pieces to ground myself in the aspects of my identity that I cherished. I selected images including a skull with a flower crown (Figure 26). A skull can represent the spirit being broken away from the physical body and becoming a tool that connects the existence of one phase of life to how it ended and gives way to a new consciousness (Kowen, 2015:23). In this sense, the skull tattoo is transformative as it represents both the existence of something and the opposite of that existence. This relates to the spiritual consciousness and how ‘life’ coexisted with ‘death’ and the end of a part of my life.

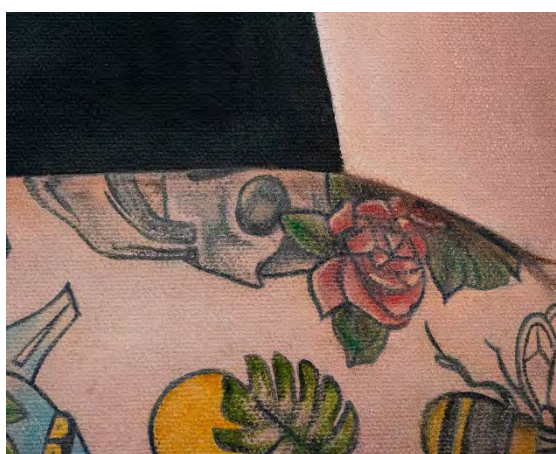


Figure 26: Detail image of Figure 22.

The teapot tattoo (Figure 27) contributes to my identity because my family and I have drunk tea together since I can recall. There is a specific process in which tea is made in my family. When I was a child, my grandmother would have me remake the tea if it was not to her liking. Our tea needed to be strong, and not too sweet. It is something that reminds me of home.

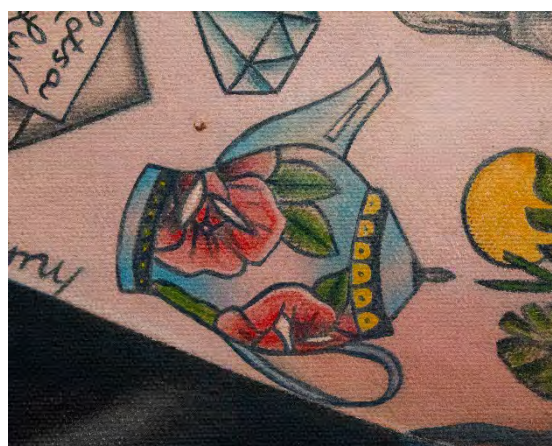


Figure 27: Detail image of Figure 22.

The *Monstera* plant tattoo (Figure 28) is symbolic of having this species of plant in the house while growing up. It is also reminiscent of how I would propagate these plants during this time to gain a sense of purpose.



Figure 28: Detail image of Figure 22.

The diamond in Figure 29 was acquired in memory of my grandmother. This tattoo was inspired by Alphaville’s song *Forever Young*. The lyrics of this song read, “Youth is like diamonds in the sun, and diamonds are forever”. That song has always reminded me of my grandmother as she was young at heart and lived unapologetically until the end of her life.



Figure 29: Detail image of Figure 22.

The love letter (Figure 30) is representative of letters my parents would send each other when they were young. My father would sign these letters with “Lotsa luv, Jeremy”. This piece is also symbolic of the people in my life who I love, and the meaning I have found in those relationships.



Figure 30: Detail image of Figure 22.

The bee tattoo (Figure 31) represents my experience with bees growing up near bodies of water with lush gardens. I do not fear bees because my mother would often say that they would not hurt me unless they felt threatened. Bees are imperative for the sustainability of the environment; the human race would not progress much further without them as they play an important ecological part as pollinators of a wide range of plant species (Patel et al, 2021:49). This is imperative for food production and landscape conservation and diversity (Patel et al, 2021:49). Bees are small, but each one is significant because of the work that it does. I like to use this as a metaphor in my life. This influences my thinking and, in turn, my identity.



Figure 31: Detail image of Figure 22.

Although anxious and depressive symptoms are usually experienced after a traumatic experience has taken place (Crompton et al., 2021:1244), the traumatic experience was arguably the onset of these symptoms. My ability to go about my day without excessive fear seemed out of reach.

The consequence of nail biting has led to one of my most prominent physical insecurities; at its worst, the damage I have caused can make my nailbeds seem to cause me pain – and they do at times. According to Siddiqui et al., the habit of nail-biting has been linked to conditions such as anxiety and depression, and some researchers have theorised that this habit is a sign of “self-hostility and [a] result of self-mutilation and nervous anxiety” (2020:98). Including in this self-portrait the state of my nails is an effective visual portrayal of my state of mind and how I constantly felt on edge. In contrast, the tattoos visible on my body allowed me to change my body in a way that I better appreciated, and gave me a sense of confidence and encouragement, affirming myself in my creative expression. My gathered pose and facial expression reflect the acceptance of my history as the present facilitates an ongoing relationship with both my past and my tattoos. I have portrayed myself realistically, which adds a sense of honesty pertaining to my lived experience. This suggests that my body, with its tattoos, is a vessel for memory and experience, and a map of my personal history.

For the background, I observed a sweet pea tattoo on my inner arm which is hidden in the painting and is reminiscent of spending time in my grandmother’s garden – a safe place – as a child. This tattoo inspired a wallpaper-like composition of sweet pea vines, leaves, and flowers.

My tattoos offer me a way to continue bonds with objects and people in my history, including previous versions of myself. Memorial tattoos are visual illustrations of the bonds that still exist between the living and the deceased – the present and the past – and affirm the connection of personal relationships (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:7). My tattoos are a tangible connection to the past and provide a sense of comfort in a deeply personal and meaningful way. My tattoo designs (both on my body and in my work) draw upon personal symbols within the traditional American tattoo style. The act of recreating these tattoos serves as a personal record of creative evolution as it communicates differences and growth between the early designs and the more recent ones.

4.5. Sculpture Series: Recreating the Tattooed Self

As the study progressed, I realised the potential limitations of only working two-dimensionally, therefore, the research led me to interrogate the possibility of three-

dimensional approaches to the conceptual underpinning. I initially experimented with Plaster of Paris to explore the potential sculptural elements. Historically, Plaster of Paris has been used for casting and preservation purposes for injured limbs, as well as building (Ruscoe, 2019). Recreating parts of my body in this material explores memory and the desire to capture a moment in time. Directly relating to tattooing as a practice that permanently captures an image or text and, in my case, valuable symbolic meaning. I experimented with Plaster of Paris by casting my arm with body double,² securing the set body double with plaster bandages, and pouring in the plaster mixture once the bandages had set to secure the integrity of the structure. This process seemed to be effective in capturing detail, however the fingers of the sculpture would break off (Figure 32). I also attempted to lay the plaster bandages directly onto my skin to make a mould of my hand before pouring in the Plaster of Paris. From this process, I found that the detail of my skin was lost and that the grooves of the bandages had been embedded onto the sculpture (Figure 33).



Figure 32: Studio practice process. Plaster of Paris.



Figure 33: Studio practice process. Plaster of Paris.

I began filling the body double casts with resin instead to better capture the small grooves on the skin, and to preserve the sculptures' integrity. Resin is a solid material that is hard and brittle to the touch. As a plastic liquid in its unreactive state, it solidifies once it is exposed to the oxygen and is met with the hardening part, transforming its

² Body double is a silicone-like substance which is applied to the skin and left to set. It is usually used to realistically recreate elements of the body.

materiality (Saadi et al. 2024:33). Resin is a durable material that can preserve casts of my body for a long time, symbolising the permanence of tattoos and their significance to me. Tattoos can be perceived as permanent expressions of identity and memory, and using resin can reinforce this idea by preserving the tattoo designs in a durable, tangible form. Epoxy-based composite materials, such as resin, have excellent mechanical properties and chemical resistance; they are used when durable materials are needed and provide adhesion and strength (Knapčiková et al, 2020:1492). I primed the sculptures with a white spray primer before adding my traditional American tattoo designs from my journal in thin layers of oil paint which sank into the surface.

Resin's transformation from a liquid to a solid is like the process of getting a tattoo because both involve a physical and visible change. By using resin to recreate parts of my body as sculptures, I aim to capture this permanent process of change and emphasise the transformative qualities that tattoos possess for me. This represents the layers of meaning and personal history embedded in my skin. The process of tattooing is met with the relationship between the "unique inversion of permanence [...] and impermanence" (Daly, 2022:88). Today, modern tattooing continues tradition that begun in ancient times and has survived, evolving over centuries (Daly, 2022:100).

"My goal of tattooing marble is to create a double identity sculpture: tattooing old masterpieces means donating a second life and, in a contemporary way, a new collective. Today, tattoos could be considered as a suit that everybody may wear; old statues, too" (Viale cited in Neira, 2020).

In this way of layering states of existence, Viale gives his statues two different identities: the statues are both a product of their original states and a product of their changes. Like Viale, I incorporate symbolic tattoos that represent themes of life and death – the beginning and end, old and new – on a surface that is penetrable with pigment. These symbols can be universally recognised as skulls, flowers, and unique icons that relate to experience. In my work, I have combined personal and universal symbols to connect my grief with the collective experience of loss. Here, the combination of life and death, and pain and healing exist as the resin sculptures preserve my body and speak to how I was permanently changed by grief: the tattoos represent things and people lost, altering my body (skin) and soul (mind).

I reference Viale's work to explore sculptural elements to depict my tattoos, using resin to capture permanence. This durable material allows me to preserve a lasting representation of my physical self. While the resin is robust, it can have imperfections from the casting process, potentially referencing the fragile nature of myself as a human being undergoing life changes juxtaposed with the strength I found through tattooing. Resin's transformation from a liquid to a solid upon the setting process speaks to the physical and emotional change I felt when undergoing the tattoo ritual process. This relates to the concept of tattooing as a practice that permanently captures an image or text and, in my case, valuable symbolic meaning. By recreating tattooed parts of my body in this material, I explore memory as I capture a moment in time during constant flux.

My work has been influenced by Viale in numerous ways. I initially considered recreating my left arm only, copying my real-life tattoo designs onto the sculpture. By observing the range of Viale's work, I decided it would be more effective to have a series of sculptures which are alike in that they are all made from casts of my body with resin, but different in that their poses and tattoos are unique. As the marble Viale utilises allows the pigment of the tattoos to sink into the surface, primed resin has a similar composition in which thinned oil paint sinks into the surface of the sculpture and creates a smoother, more life-like aesthetic. The resin allows me to recreate my body with textured detail, suggesting that my tattoos can represent multiple identities at once to make up my personal narrative. Tattoos are "symptom(s) of the complex relationship between the physical and social body" (Fisher, 2002, cited by Crompton et al., 2021:1243-1244). By sharing sculptures of my body embellished with custom-designed tattoos that incorporate symbolic references from my narratives, I invite viewers into an intimate space where each tattoo is indicative of a memory, thought, or experience. These encapsulate facets of my personal loss and healing which is represented as the product of the tattoo ritual on my body.

Figure 34 is a resin sculpture of my left arm with a painted tattoo of a large dagger design with a red sun symbolised by a solid red circle. After work one late afternoon, I was feeling particularly low. I walked past my kitchen door and noticed a knife on the counter. I can only recall one occasion when I felt I was close to ending my life, and it was at that moment. I called a friend immediately. Later, I had been at her house for 30 minutes

before I threw up uncontrollably from the stress and tension. An experience like this was the result of ongoing grappling with depression and anxiety. The isolated sun connecting the tattoo design around the arm is symbolic of the end of the day when the sun sets; I would arrive home to an empty flat where I would deal with my thoughts, scared and alone.



Figure 34: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *It's Just a Dagger*. Mixed media on resin.

Figure 35 is a sculpture which consists of various tattoos. The most prominent image in this piece is of a man with a red eye. The text at the bottom reads “No pain no gain”. Although enduring this time of my life was incredibly difficult, I have grown from it. I have learned things about myself that I wouldn't have known otherwise. My mental health was painful to deal with, but I gained valuable knowledge in my suffering.



Figure 35. Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *Ouch, That Hurt*. Mixed media on resin.

Figure 36 includes a half-moon and an eye. The half-moon is symbolic of transition and change as I experienced a great deal of uncertainty during that time of flux. The eye represents me – my past and future self – watching my present self with love and pride as I make my way through life and its challenges.



Figure 36: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *I'm trying to be Mindful*. Mixed media on resin.

Both my work and Viale's focus on mental health and situations of fear and pain. I have designed various symbolic tattoo designs as symbolic metaphors which focus on fear and pain in a time of emotional despair and change. I have found power in celebrating things about myself that I once thought were flaws in my character, personality, or appearance. My mental state of mind during anxious and depressive periods rendered me scared and uncomfortable. It gave me an incorrect perspective of myself as an individual and as an energy that connects with other beings within a larger context. Instead, I embraced painful experiences through tattooing within the social settings of those experiences and used the differences between myself and others as ways to connect with people depending on how I chose to utilise what my social environment offered me.

The compositions of my series of 12 hand and arm sculptures have been inspired by the composition of the hand and arm sculptures in Viale's work. During the creation of some of these sculptures, I twisted my arms and hands in different ways to visually render the various emotional states I found myself in. The body double would set in a way that is not how the body would rest naturally. This was inspired by how Viale distorts his sculptures, and these deliberate poses communicate my emotional discomfort as the body is changed from the mind as a physical manifestation of mental strain.

To further explore self-portraiture in this research, I created three tattooed sculptures of my face (Figure 37) using the same process. The faces are depicted with closed eyes and embellished with tattoos from my journal. Sleep disturbance is one of the most prevalent side effects of mental distress (Staner, 2003:252). Most of my panic attacks would take place in the middle of the night. I would awake in the early hours of the morning and think myself into despair to the point where it would feel like I was having a heart attack. When this happened, I could not move. The use of resin to freeze my face in a moment in time represents the immobilising effect of anxiety. The intersection of mind, body, and emotional trauma offers a commentary about how anxiety can shape self-perception as the tattoos emphasise the emotional and psychological marks left on the self over time, here presented as symbolic tattoos.



Figure 37: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. 3 AM. Mixed media on resin.

The resin sculptures of my body have been ‘tattooed’ with symbolic images which visually document significant happenings by use of reflection and hindsight. Tattoo designs on these sculptures, selected from my journal, have been painted on the sculptures of my body to indicate the permanent embodiment of these narratives.

4.6. The Tattoo Ritual Recreated

The ritualistic role of tattooing is, in my experience, symbolic of permanent change or transformation – not just on my body but in my life as it progresses. To better understand tattooing as a grief ritual for this research, I underwent the process of acquiring a tattoo again. This time, I maintained a mentality of mindfulness and observation.

Soft music was playing as I entered the studio. The environment was lively with decorations including a waving Maneki-neko, *Monstera* plants, used stencils and framed designs. I was met with familiar, clean scents which I found to be both calming and exciting. Dim chatter and laughter filled the studio.

I designed the original tattoos in my journal, keeping in mind the shapes of the areas on my skin that I had wanted them to fill (Figure 38), re-drawn by Caitlyn Long (Figure 39). The pot plant tattoo is symbolic of growth, development, and nurturing. Further referencing the cultivation of knowledge and ideas over time, highlighting the importance of patience and care, hence the variety of plants. The pot plant is also a product of its environment, which is important when considering the tattoo ritual. The dice tattoo is representative of taking a chance in life when facing uncertainty. This piece alludes to the idea of control – whether control is an illusion, and to chance and probability, risk and decision-making, and strategy when facing life’s challenges.



Figure 38: Nicole Anne Bower. 2024. Tattoo journal design, mixed media on paper.

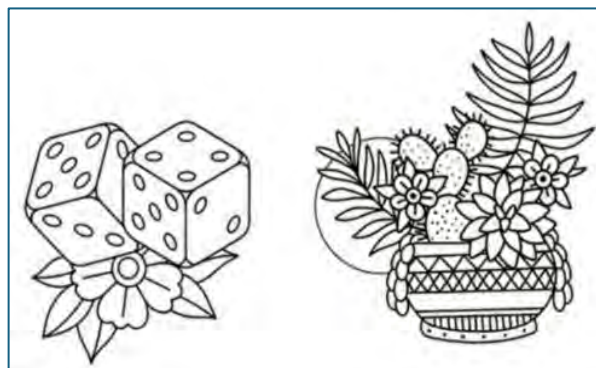


Figure 39: Caitlyn Long. 2024. Digital drawing.

4.7. Tattoo Ritual Series

Close-up shots were taken of my skin being shaved, cleaned, and prepared for tattooing (Figure 40). The tattoo stencils were applied (Figure 41). Soon, I was lying on my back with my left arm outstretched, my palm facing upwards. I was nervous and excited. I felt the pressure of the tattoo artist's hands on my arm and heard the high-pitched vibrating sound of the tattoo machine to begin the outlines. I felt a sweet, controlled pain. The sensation then evolved into a continuous stinging and scratching on my skin.



Figure 40: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *A Clean Slate*. Mixed media on canvas.

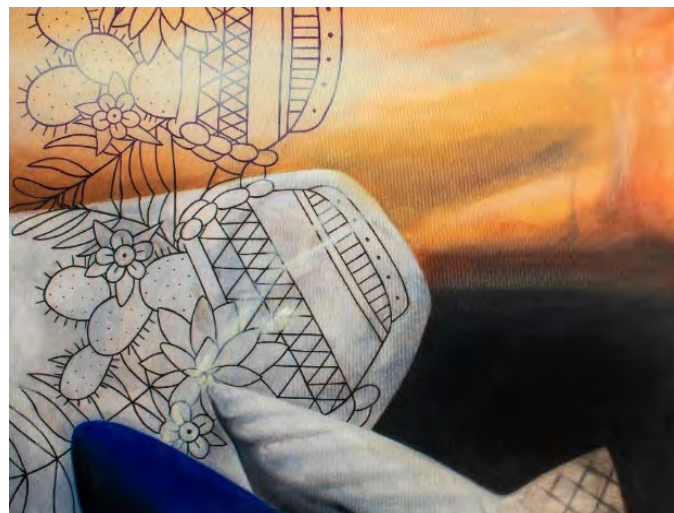


Figure 41: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *Lines of Letting Go*. Mixed media on canvas.

Once the outlines of the designs had been completed, the tattoo artist changed to a broader set of needles for shading the areas with solid black, red, and green (Figure 42).

The pain was emphasised immediately. With the lower hum of the tattoo machine for these needles, I started to experience a wave of adrenaline, sweating, and a change in my breathing. I could feel my muscles tensing and straining – a restlessness in my body. I tried to think of something else instead of focusing on the pain. I noticed that the pain was more enjoyable when the outlines were being done. This was a raw, sharp pain. I found that this feeling helped me appreciate normality, but I felt comfort in that I could focus on that moment only instead of any other worries. It was especially comforting knowing that the physical pain I was experiencing was guaranteed not to last, but that the tattoo was. To me, there was much personal meaning associated with the pain I was experiencing; the meaning of the tattoo – as an artefact of research and as a permanent symbol on my body – outweighed the discomfort and added to my enjoyment. Though the broader set of needles was very uncomfortable to tolerate, I experienced a sense of relief, satisfaction, and pride. The pain enhanced the arrival of the new tattoo.

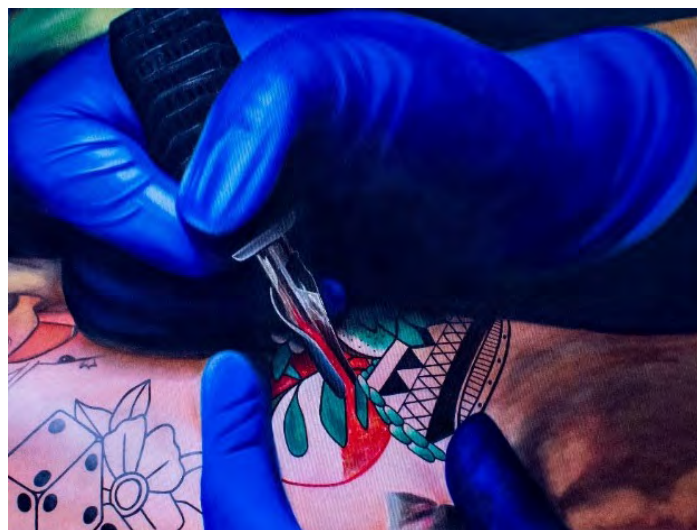


Figure 42: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *Controlled Pain*. Mixed media on canvas.

While the physical pain of getting a tattoo may seem counterintuitive to easing emotional pain, I have found that the sensation of the needles can serve as a distraction from emotional distress. Focusing on the present moment and the physical sensation of the tattooing process provides me with a temporary sense of relief from worry and a way to welcome emotional comfort. It is, in a sense, a cathartic process of release because it allows me to externalise emotions and trauma.

The tattoo artist would pause to clean the skin by wetting it with a solution and wiping the excess ink and blood off with a paper towel, providing instant relief to my hot skin in the wake of the needles (Figure 43). After about two hours, we were done, and my arm was wrapped up (Figure 44).



Figure 43: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *Instant Relief*. Mixed media on canvas.



Figure 44: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *Clingwrap Closure*. Mixed media on canvas.

I experienced a feeling of relief to have filled up empty areas of the skin on my left arm with more art; it looked more complete as the individual tattoos came together as a unit on my skin. When the process was over, I felt an increase in my body temperature. My arms, chest and face were red for 30 minutes after the appointment, and my heart rate stayed high for a while afterwards. I returned to my hotel room to write detailed notes of

the experiences including my thoughts, observations, and emotions during the process. I recorded sensations of pain, levels of discomfort and comfort, and the atmosphere of the tattoo studio. I accounted for how I engaged with my physical body during this process through reflection and note-taking. This aligns with my research focus on the tactile and sensory aspects of tattooing as a grief ritual. Additionally, I collected discarded tattoo materials such as the ink-stained paper towels in Figure 45, surgical gloves, needle packaging, and the used stencils from my appointment (Figure 46) to display and observe in the studio.

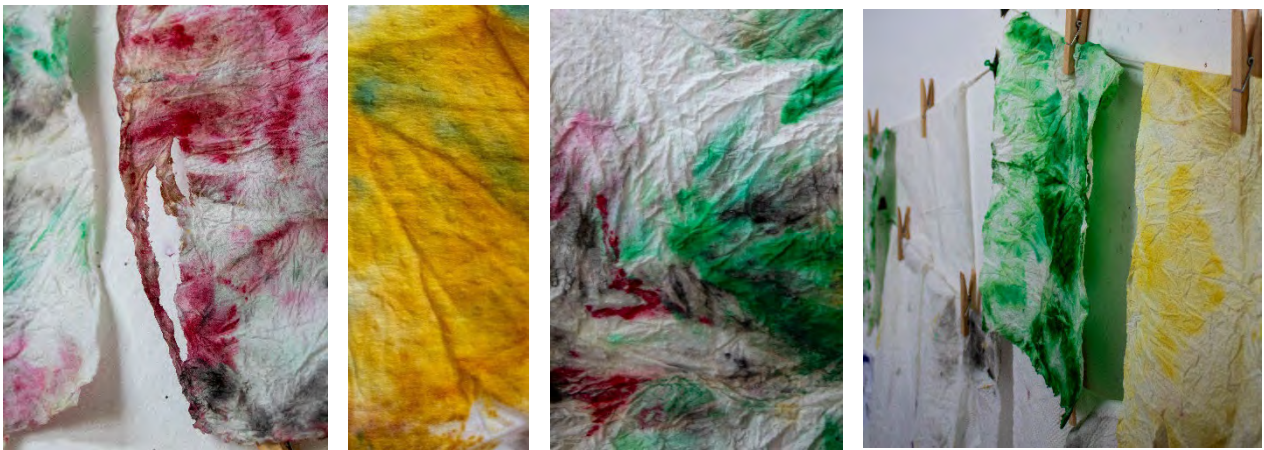


Figure 45: Tattoo ink-stained paper towels.



Figure 46: Discarded items.

Five images of the tattoo ritual have been recreated as artworks (Figures 40, 41, 42, 43 and 44), focussing on individual steps in tattooing such as shaving the skin, applying the stencil, penetrating ink into the skin with needles, wiping off excess fluids, and wrapping up the area. The artworks focus on specific aspects of the tattooing process that may have been overlooked, such as the clearing hair with a razor (Figure 40) which references the element of self-injury in tattooing as the blade is so firmly against the skin. Removing all other aspects in this photograph to only focus on the skin, the razor, and the artist's hand allows the viewer to feel closer to the subject and feel that agency.

The use of oil paint adds a tactile and emotional quality to the images as otherwise sensitive parts of the body, like veins, are portrayed and even emphasised through the skin. The texture and depth achieved with oil paint convey physical sensitivity and sensations, and the emotional weight of the tattooing process more vividly than photography alone. This aims to make the viewer aware of the layers of interpretation and mediation involved in the tattooing process, the production of paintings, and the act of viewing art, fostering a deeper connection to the experience depicted. The size of the pieces, customisation of the composition, and technical qualities of the paintings offer a more accurate personal interpretation of the scene and draw attention to the aspects I was focusing on during those moments. This also allows me to guide the viewer through my experience, highlighting moments of vulnerability, pain, and transformation.

There are various social conceptual underpinnings of the tattoos visible in this body of work as each of the five paintings portrays how the tattoo artist interacted with my body and skin. There is an emphasis on the sensations that I was experiencing from another's actions. This is important given that the tattooing process enables physical and emotional healing within the social context of the painful experience, influencing the way the tattooee experiences pain in the environment (Nicholas et al., 2017:993). A painful experience in this sense involves how our bodies relate to our social surroundings: our bodies are layered with meanings (Stanier et al. 2021:112). The painting process employed here embodies that "layering" effect that meanings introduce to the body. Layers of thin paint are added one by one in between intervals where the piece dries, and together the layers inform a new image altogether.

4.8. Blur Series

This series explores the environment in which the tattoo ritual takes place. Observing the placement of my body in the tattoo studio has been constructed with stylistic qualities inspired by Barber's work.

Figure 47 features me lying on the tattoo bed as the tattoo ritual was taking place, and Figure 49 features the tattoo material packaging and bottles of ink within in studio environment. The blurriness has been incorporated from the original images and resonates with the stylistic qualities and subject matter of Barber's piece *Kim Saigh at Work (Tattooing Jamie Kompon)* (Figure 50). I chose to paint these pieces with Barber's technical style, subject matter and composition in mind. I made use of detailed, controlled, and structured brush strokes while including dripping paint and broader, looser strokes in certain areas (Figure 48).



Figure 47: Nicole Anne Boucher. 2024. *Thoughts in Slow Motion*. Mixed media on canvas.

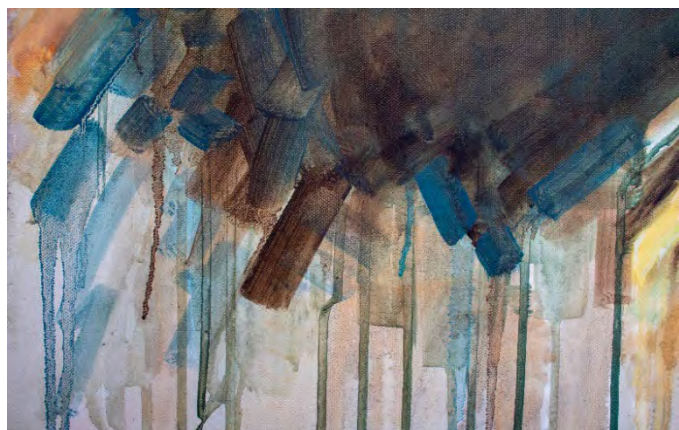


Figure 48: Detail image of Figure 47.



Figure 49: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *Thoughts in Slow Motion*. Mixed media on canvas.



Figure 50: Shawn Barber. 2014. *Kim Saigh at Work (Tattooing Jamie Kompon)*. Oil on canvas.

I have painted on canvas since the beginning of my artmaking journey and the act of doing so encourages a form of dialogue in myself as an artist. The canvas becomes a space in which my thoughts, emotions, and ideas are expressed visually on an impartial surface. My paintings on canvas link the present to the past in that they are recreations of events, feelings and ideas of the past, yet they are preserved and act as a visual legacy of my experiences and histories. This creates a visual record that helps maintain a sense of continuity of personal identity. Painting on canvas has acted as a tool for personal change and self-exploration. It provides a durable surface upon which paint can be manipulated more fluidly, allowing me to have greater control of the mark-making process.

Painting my triggers, my self-portrait, and the tattoo ritual allowed me to explore and express my inner thoughts and emotions. The canvas acted as a space for reflection and a way to help me make sense of my experiences. This is also relevant when exploring personal challenges as the process of painting on canvas – layer by layer – mirrors the acts of meaning-making as interpretations are made to make sense of life. The act of painting on canvas ties in with the resin sculptures in that the tattoos have been painted onto the surface layer by layer, allowing me to explore my emotional triggers as well as my physical body where the tattoos reside, through the process of painting.

4.9. Tattoo Environment Series

The environment of the tattoo ritual deeply influences what the experience offers. The use of the environment can alter the experience and offer the bereaved a safe space. Here, the healing begins following trauma as the symbolic value of the tattoo narrates the traumatic memory, allowing the tattooee to re-experience it and foster a deeper comprehension (Crompton et al., 2021:1244). Environmental context influences how people perceive and draw information from their senses and how the body exists in space (Nicholas et al., 2017:993). Our interactions are embedded in an environment, and we are embodied in that we exist beyond our brains, experiencing the world with our bodies (Tabor et al., 2017:007). The way I experienced pain in the tattoo studio is influenced by how I perceived the environment around me. I was given time to lay in one place for multiple hours. My senses of sight and touch were heightened; I often tried to focus on decorative items around me when the pain intensified. I observed ornaments, old stencils and art on the walls, and shelves with tattoo equipment. I selected photographs of these items and recreated them with tattoo ink on paper and later on a canvas (Figures 51, 52 and 53).



Figure 51: Nicole Anne Bouwer 2024. Studio practice process. Tattoo ink on watercolour paper.

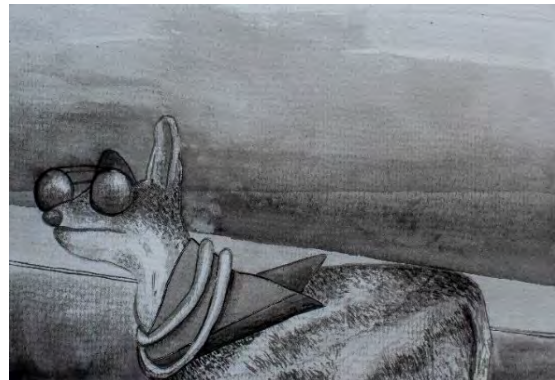


Figure 52: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. Studio practice process. Tattoo ink on watercolour paper.



Figure 53. Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. Studio practice process. Tattoo ink on mixed media.

I used tattoo ink to emphasise the permanent and lasting nature of the tattoo ritual. Ink is the medium through which my narratives and emotions are expressed, and it is a substance well manipulated on the canvas with water. The way tattoo ink interacts with water explores the transformation that accompanies grief and highlights the fluid and unpredictable nature of emotional healing. The ink is applied to the surface in layers, further denoting layers of meaning that accumulate in this process as symbols are inscribed onto the body.

From this, I created a series of five pieces (Figure 54). The small scale of these works reflects the intimate nature of tattoos and the experiences of memory. As tattoos may act as markers of significant events, the nuanced nature of them as small objects that make up a body – and a process done in a larger environment – reflect how grief in physical and emotional form can be experienced in isolated and intense moments.



Figure 54: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. *Walls and Shelves*. Tattoo ink on canvas.

The environment plays a role in trauma and processing. By recreating a series of images relating to the tattoo environment, I illustrate how the environment interacted with my memories and emotions during the tattoo experience. The paintings are small and represent tiny parts of larger contexts. Each unit acts as a snapshot of my memory from that experience, exploring how environmental factors contribute to the emotional and sensory dimensions of the tattoo ritual.

4.10. Video: *Inked Places, Inner Spaces*

This video features close-up shots of my face during the process, the Vaseline on the back of the tattoo artist's left hand, needles and ink in my skin, the wiping of the paper towel on the surface of my skin, the overhead light, and the wrapping of my arm (Figure 55). The video includes a sample of the sound of the tattoo machine from that day.



Figure 55: Nicole Anne Bouwer. 2024. Screenshots of *Inked Places, Inner Spaces*.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=l5RLqDtMgRY&ab_channel=NicoleAnneBouwer

I believe the live visual documentation of the tattooing process authentically captured the embodied experience of tattooing. Reviewing this content provided me with a sense of fulfilment and a feeling that I had evolved emotionally. I felt excited to watch my skin react to the pressure of the tattoo artist's hands as she held the needles of the tattoo machine firmly against my skin and steadily wiped away the ink and blood. It was also surreal to observe the shots of my face during the ritual featured in this condensed video; the experience of those two hours of tattooing was dense with sensation and

mindfulness. Watching the content in hindsight, I feel that my mind was very present in the ritual, but also far away as I internally processed what was happening.

The material that was acquired from this is evidence of the transformative journey that is possible through tattooing. I can understand and observe how the tattoo experience unfolds, showing moments of vulnerability, resilience, and empowerment. This corresponds with the research focus of tattooing as a ritualistic practice that facilitates personal growth, healing, and self-discovery. Through the documentation of this process, I explored the symbolic expression inherent in tattooing. My experience of the symbolic meanings and personal narratives in the tattooing process aligns with the research interest in exploring the symbolism and emotional significance of tattoos as a form of personal expression and healing.

Artistic exploration, expression, and representation are evident here as I visually convey the aesthetic, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of the tattooing process in my practical work, including the paintings of the tattoo ritual and ink drawings of the tattoo environment recreated from my documentation. These aid the understanding of how artistic expression intersects with personal healing and grief during the grief and healing ritual of tattooing.

The ritualistic role of tattooing is, in my experience, symbolic of permanent change and transformation. This applies not just to my body but to my life as it progresses. I felt that the act of getting a tattoo allowed me to channel my grief into a physical form, providing emotional expression and help process complex feelings. I would describe experiencing a welcomed pain in a controlled, clean, and inviting environment to be a cathartic experience when done at the right time. I felt that the act of getting a tattoo allowed me to channel my grief into a physical form, providing emotional expression and help process complex feelings.

“A tattoo, I’ve always believed, is a visual reminder of pain, which has the tendency to be forgotten quickly and so sometimes requires documentation. This tattoo was my document of a particular kind of suffering, suffering I wanted to keep in mind and was afraid I wouldn’t: I knew what a fickle slut my memory can be” (Trachtenberg, 1998:38, cited in Wonneberger, 2020:38).

According to Wonneberger, tattoos can act as a medium through which we can heal from psychological trauma (2020:2). In my experience, this was only experienced when I began acquiring tattoos during bouts of anxiety and depression and undergoing a difficult change in my life. Feeling the emotional heaviness lift from this process was a therapeutic experience and left me positively transformed as the video aims to portray.

The video and sound documentation of the tattoo ritual allow me to share the tattoo ritual and accurately show the circumstances in which it took place. By capturing the visual and sound elements of the tattoo ritual, I have preserved the process and made it more accessible. The video is also taken from various perspectives so viewers can witness the ritual from various points of view, including mine as the tattooee.

4.11. Summary

I have (re)constructed myself alongside elements of my individual and social identity. They pertain to this time in my life and encourage dialogue in that it initiated discourse within myself as I could explore and refine my ideas, effectively combining visual elements with my inner thoughts and emotions.

The designs featured in the journal have been adapted onto paper, canvas, and resin. The variety of mediums used allows me to explore the healing properties of each. Throughout this visual research, working with various mediums has allowed me to engage with the art of Viale and Barber, incorporating their stylistic and technical approaches, as well as their conceptual ideas around identity and transformation. By drawing on their subject matter, I have reflected on my own lived experiences as a tattooed person within tattoo culture and integrated these insights into my studio practice. I have used materials to explore applicable concepts concerning healing through tattooing (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021). Creating these artworks has mirrored the healing and grief journey, aligning with my interdisciplinary approach to drawing insights from various artistic disciplines. Different practical media have offered diverse perspectives on my research themes and their intersection. Each unit of work discusses unique symbolic meaning, forming a personal visual narrative of healing from grief through tattooing. I have also analysed and recreated significant parts of a live documentation of a tattooing procedure on my body by tattoo artist Caitlyn Long which was visually captured by photographer Wesley Lewis

(b. 1994) at Cape Electric Tattoo, Cape Town. This has allowed me to organically relive initial tattoo ritual experiences undergone previously and more accurately research tattooing's function as a ritual.

Memorial tattoos are a self-healing tool which is relevant to a change in identity: they are both visually and conceptually captivating and represent change which empowers the grieving person to emerge from loss with an artwork (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:6). My tattoos mediate a change of identity as I grow, ultimately memorialising my lived experiences. I have found that tattoos can integrate memory and elements of others into the self. As they express personal narratives, my tattoos allow me to express my story of how loss and change have shaped me. In this way, my tattoos are a physical manifestation of my identity as it evolves, representing the integration of grief and the new person I have become.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In this research undertaking, I explored how tattooing has functioned as a grief and healing ritual in my experience. This research was deeply rooted in my lived experience of using tattooing as a therapeutic tool to alleviate emotional turmoil. In seeking to explore tattooing and identity, I drew on a few core concepts, namely how tattooing can function as a grief and healing ritual, how emotional pain can be materialised through the physical pain of tattooing, how and why tattoos have symbolic merit, and how these dynamics influence social and individual identity.

The grief and healing ritual of tattooing is done under ritual-like circumstances and is achieved by following a sequence of steps (Bergh, 2016:590). Through the tattoo ritual, my tattoos have facilitated changes in my consciousness by encouraging emotional transformation with their manipulation, representing what has been lost and who I was before the loss, fostering remembrance, expression and connection (Sas et al., 2016:12, 7). The tattoo ritual has allowed me to claim ownership of my circumstances and experiences and ensure an ongoing connection that links the past to the present. In the face of life's constant flux, my tattoos offer me permanence, consistency and stability. I have marked my skin with personal stories of loss and change (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:4). The tattoo ritual is a cathartic process which empowers me and allows emotional pain to the surface for confrontation and healing (Swann-Thomas, et al., 2021:5). By inserting needles into my skin, the pain associated with grief can be processed through the tattooing process, creating meaning as my emotional pain is transformed into physical pain (Swann-Thomas et al., 2021:6,15). By doing this, I reclaim control of traumatic events in a controlled environment, using the process and tattoo symbol to reframe the traumatic experience (Crompton et al., 2021:1244). This process is determined by my feelings, social exchanges, and cultural narratives which have collectively assisted in forming trauma (Crompton et al., 2021:1242). My body becomes a site of affirmations; my tattoos serve as a way for me to re-experience trauma and provide an instrument for deeper understanding through my body, allowing emotional pain and physical pain to influence tattooing as a grief and healing ritual (Crompton et al., 2021:244).

Social context affects how I experience pain, and the environment in which pain occurs shapes how the threat linked to that pain is perceived (Nicholas et al., 2017:993). These painful experiences are layered with intersubjective meaning, suggesting that pain is deeply ingrained in my bodily self as my environment is constantly reshaping how I experience pain (Stanier et al., 2021:101; Tabor et al., 1007). In this sense, pain significantly influences how I interact with my environment and what my environment offers me (Tabor et al., 2017:1007).

Originating from a system of social and cultural factors, pain is entangled with the concept of pleasure (Fayyaz, 2011:144,101). Spiritual pain focuses on the past and its memories, the present and its isolation, and the future and its fear (Brunjes, 2010:32). When experiencing loss, my belief system was tested along with my sense of identity. I found meaning in the next phase of my life as I reinterpreted my suffering and was able to move forward with more hope and confidence. I made sense of the change, found positive offerings from it, and welcomed a new identity for myself (Gilles et al. 2006:31). This provided me with a rejuvenated sense of control as I was creating new meaning engaging with a medium of personal reconstruction.

I make sense of the world through my consciousness and form a symbolic language. This language is dependent on individual cognition and experience as symbols rely on allegorical thoughts and personal connotations (Zhirenov et al., 2016:2841-2843). My tattoos function as signs on my body and are constructed with layers of context for their interpretation of meaning (Kovalala, 2014:161-162). Today, tattoos are associated with personal narratives, autonomy and individuality. They may be used as tools to reinforce meaning-making and promote stories of healing from distress (McCandlish et al., 2023:218). This process of developing and sharing narratives assists mental well-being and recovery as they are social symbols of change (Khoury, 2020, cited in McCandlish et al, 2023:218).

Mental health and tattoos interact with the body as a vehicle: the body is a public and private space. Tattoos encourage emotions to be transferred from the object, person, or experience of loss to the tattoo. This way, my tattoos make my hidden trauma visible as I transform painful stories into stories of agency, recovery and growth (McCandlish et al., 2023:223). These visual narratives in my skin can be understood in various ways as they

are translated into different meanings which are shared with others. My tattoos are communicative tools and are used for social and emotional connection which offer self-preservation (Bergh, 2016:585,595). My tattoos represent human experience and start a conversation as they translate loss into a visual language better understood by those around me.

People respond to grief on a symbolic level as they experience changes in both personal and collective capacities (Neimeyer et al., 2002:235). Symbolism is a significant thread in tattoo practice as tattooing is representative of personal meaning and experiences formed through visual language. A tattoo is not just a symbolic truth; it is a dynamic process where identity and meaning are shaped by a person's experiences and social interactions (Crompton et al., 2021:1244). My tattoos fortify my identity and connect my sense of past and history to the present, acting as an extension of myself and symbolising myself to others as, although personal, their meanings are often underpinned by cultural practice (Velliquette, 1998:3). Understanding how the self is created and maintained in the context of modern society is important when exploring how tattooing relates to the self's expression and development (Cesare, 2011:9).

My appearance has a profound influence on my social interactions and relationships: interactions form my basic understanding of self and assist me to learn and empathise with the people around me (Cesare, 2011:9). My patterns of behaviour and perception of self are the product of my socialisation, and my interactions with others offer me opportunities to fulfil and create a way for my identity to develop further (Cesare, 2011:9).

As identities are shaped by personal belief systems, people often feel pressured to conform to these categories to build connections and improve their self-image (Cesare, 2011:11). Social identity theory offers a useful framework for understanding identity development, linking social and individual processes (Cesare, 2011:11). Both tattooing and identity involve permanent categorisation with social identity playing a key role in self-identification. The tattoo ritual combines physicality, emotional vulnerability, symbolic meaning, and identity transformation.

This practice-based research is a visual exploration of how I have experienced tattooing as a grief and healing ritual. I have explored key concepts and artists that influenced and

inspired my work. These artists included Fabio Viale and Shawn Barber who largely influenced the techniques I drew on. I brought these into conversation with my practical work, which includes mediums such as pen on paper, oil and acrylic on canvas, tattoo ink on canvas, oil on resin, and video and sound media. The different mediums used have assisted to in exploring my experiences of tattooing as a ritual from multiple perspectives. Each work in the series is intimately connected to my lived experience as I explore my emotional triggers, my experiences with the tattoo ritual to aid change and turmoil, my experience with grief and healing, and my identity using hindsight, reflection and constructivism.

The practice-based autoethnographic approach for this thesis made it possible for me to explore my experiences of tattooing as a grief and healing ritual to materialise and alleviate emotional pain with physical pain, symbolism as a tool to communicate to the self and others, and the social implications of tattoos as signs on the body. In this thesis, I examined the symbolism in the art of contemporary tattooing, and how my lived experience with symbolic visual narratives influenced (and is influencing) my healing. In doing so, I showed that tattoos are communicative signs and possess profound symbolic value as they assist in lessening emotional turmoil and re-frame traumatic events on my terms. This thesis, further, explored the relationship between the physical pain of getting tattooed and the mental pain of emotional distress. It showed that emotional pain can be materialised and re-experienced with the tattoo ritual, encouraging healing. This thesis placed all the above within the context of my own identity and historical setting and explored how personal stories connect with wider cultural experiences. This shows that tattoos are tools for connection and communication on both individual and interpersonal levels.

We do not only experience grief when we lose someone close to us to something as final as death. Grief is deeper and broader than that. I have come to know that we can grieve moments in our histories, opportunities we should have taken, and decisions we could have – should have – made differently. When I experience grief, I am grieving myself; the person I have outgrown. I am also grieving the things that could have been different, and

the version of myself I would have been under different circumstances. In my experience, grief is the purest indicator of change.

In conclusion, I have found that tattoos can significantly influence the way we see, accept, evolve, and express ourselves as individuals. Tattoos assist in developing and asserting identity, values, and beliefs. Choosing a design that reflects an individual's inner self, and their journey, tends to foster a sense of self-acceptance and authenticity which can be a source of healing for emotional wounds.

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