

Janeen Gilbert
OCADU SCIN Thesis Project 2021

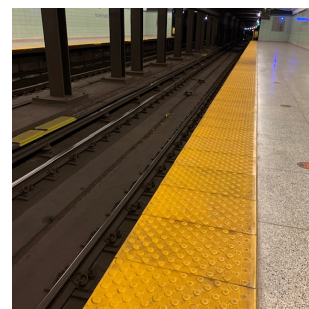
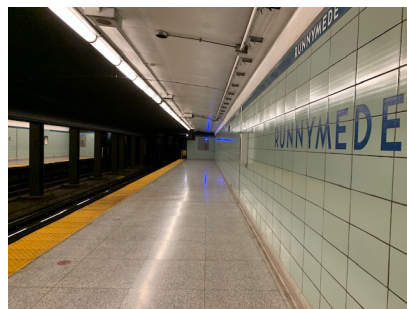
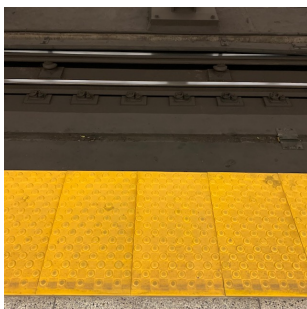
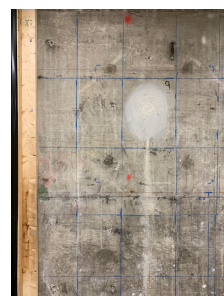
Abstract

Injury At Track Level — a ‘modern ruin’ — a memory, a portal to another time containing stories of sadness, hopelessness, dejection and despair. Sculpted concrete forms, layered and raw, embedded and embossed, stacked, placed, modular and movable — standing in for the unremembered and the overlooked — revealing the failings of a broken system and an apathetic society; while still finding the beauty in the forgotten and the lost — and believing that empathy through art can help banish isolation, encourage understanding, invite healing, and enrich our inner, emotional worlds. It is this philosophy that is engrained and encapsulated within my work.

Janeen Gilbert, *Injury at Track Level*, 2021, concrete, rebar, metal, nails, screws, porcelain tiles, tactile flooring, shoes, tie, glasses, jeans, subway transfers

I have always been fascinated with what lies within — what lurks beneath the surface — what's hidden from the world to see. My past works have peeled back the curtain on personal memories and experiences — marriage, divorce, motherhood, and childhood trauma — to reveal secrets, lies, pain, joy, and truths. Through an integrated methodology of awareness art and the affect of 'modern ruins', my new work will call attention to the common occurrence of suicide within the Toronto subway system. There are on average 33 suicidal attempts and fatalities each year — numerous people are affected by subway suicides — from the victim themselves, to their family and friends, to the TTC operator, the emergency responders, the TTC employees, and even the riders. A sudden bump, a lurk forward, a stillness — a realization, yet we carry on — we go about our day — constantly moving, seeking, striving, doing — oblivious, unheeding, even disregarding the tragedy at hand. In the name of aesthetics, convenience and efficiency, society often and unfortunately looks the other way.

Over the past four years, I've been documenting subway platforms and walls — decayed and exposed — chipped concrete, holes, cracks, rusted metal, faded paint, splintered wood — clearly visible and present, yet temporal in nature. These walls, these 'modern ruins', emanate a ghostly presence — a memory, a portal to another time and experience. They contain numerous stories of sadness, hopelessness, dejection, and despair — that are rarely shared, publicized, or talked about. Instead, tragedies such as these are withheld, hidden, only to be recorded as data, a number, a statistic — indirectly in dialogue with and in comparison to the concealment of disintegrating platform walls with shiny new facades. By analyzing and appreciating these 'modern ruins' — these stories — we grant them meaning and remembrance. The work is quite substantial in size and weight — buildings blocks (or partially constructed walls — in the process of being put up or being taken down) that interfere with the space — that demand inquiry and engagement. Remnants of clothes, items from 'the commute', found objects, construction materials, for example, the tactile yellow flooring meant to keep TTC riders safe — will be concealed, yet slightly revealed. The sculpture aims to bring about social awareness — to take the perspective of and empathize with others, to honour those who have experienced such tragedies, and to mourn those who died. The forms will stand in for lives lost, the mislay of empathy and the rise of social consciousness.



Materials

I gravitate towards geometric forms — clean lines and simplicity; tactile forms — intricate, layered and raw; sculpted forms — authentic, abstracted and implied; and purposeful forms — conceptual, personal, and embodied. I believe that materials carry with them their own unique voice and language — and that strong conceptual ideas can only be heightened and strengthened by the nature of the medium. With that being said, I have chosen to work with concrete — a building material — strong, raw, durable, heavy (literally and metaphorically), easy to chip away at, to mark, to score, to embed, and to emboss. The material speaks directly to the ‘modern ruins’ of the subway system and the aging subway platform — the underbelly — the grit behind the pristine facade. It is the material that caught my eye — that irrevocably drew me in — that for years made me get off at random subway stops to take photos — to document — to preserve the overlooked and the forgotten. I have embedded clothing items within the concrete — having them stand in for the human body — the lost and the dismissed. Metal rebar, construction materials, tiles, and yellow tactile flooring are also incorporated, fossilized, and embossed into the concrete. I’m allowing the off-casts to speak for themselves, to leave the reveal as is, to allow for unexpectedness, imperfections, and truth. My goal was to create five or more casts, but because of limited studio space and Covid lockdowns and restrictions, I only made three forms (however, I strongly believe this project can be added to and built upon — unfortunately and sadly revealing accumulating stories and tragedies. The first form casted was extremely large and heavy — it had to be cut in two in order to transport — this obstacle surprisingly generated a fascinating and worthwhile outcome. It resulted in two forms — bench-like — enticing the viewer to sit, to wait, to contemplate. Although the forms are heavy and weighted, they are not meant to be static — they can be stacked on top of one another, placed beside each other, leaned against a wall, exhibited horizontally and/or vertically. The work is modular, movable — the work lends itself to be additive or subtractive, and has the ability to change according to the space or environment it is in.

My desire was to have the work displayed and experienced outside or inside of actual Toronto subway stations. The work would be installed in front of the entrance/exit doors of Toronto subway stops — present and purposeful, not positioned to impede or hinder. The work would be temporal in nature, documented in a space that is relevant and meaningful — then removed — fleeting — indicative of the suicide victims whose bodies are quickly removed, so that the train can operate, and society can move along — get to where they need to go, oblivious or, worse, disregarding. Although this was my ‘installation goal’ — I know that without proper permits and permission it is impossible to achieve it in such a short amount of time. Nevertheless, I am excited to exhibit at Beaver Hall Gallery — and to see my thesis project come to fruition in a gallery space.

Methodology

Brian Dillon’s explanation of past and present ruins and their importance within the world speaks directly to my practice. He stated that, “Ruins embody a set of temporal and historical paradoxes.” And that, “Ruins are part of the long history of the fragment... a fragment with a future”, and they will “...live on after us despite the fact that it reminds us too of a lost wholeness or perfection.”¹ My work truly embodies this insight and understanding — as my forms borrow and replicate from the forgotten, decayed realities and failings of a seemingly broken system. Dillon goes on to explain that,

¹Dillon, Brian. *Ruins*. MIT Press: London, 2011.11

“Perhaps the most enigmatic aspect of the time of ruination is the manner in which it points towards the future rather than the past, or rather uses the ruined resources of the past to imagine, or reimagine, the future.” Furthermore, “...The ruin is a site not of melancholy or mourning but of radical potential - its fragmentary, unfinished nature is an invitation to fulfill the as yet unexplored temporality that it contains.”² My ‘modern ruins’, my constructed forms are exactly this — an invitation for the world to ponder over the crisis at hand, to stop for a minute, to think about others, to be empathetic, to imagine a future — a society that values a human life — and does what it can, wholeheartedly, to protect, help, support, and console. Dillon stated that, “Ruins...are freighted with possibility, even with utopian promise.”³ This is a beautiful, optimistic perception — one that carries over into my work — moving from a place of tragedy and despair to a point of consciousness and change. Writer, Rebecca Solnit offered another unique, emotional and poetic look at what ruins represent — she stated that, “To erase the ruins is to erase the visible public triggers of memory; a city without ruins and traces of age is like a mind without memories.”⁴ Her words deeply resonate with my work — as I believe that the decaying subway walls contain hidden stories of tragedy and sadness that are eventually covered with shiny new facades and in time forgotten. My thesis project, through the process of revealing and concealing, aims to unearth painful memories — address trauma — accept imperfections, and move towards awareness and enlightenment.

As previously mentioned, I have an intense fascination with ruined and abandoned places — perhaps it’s all about seeing the beauty in the unremembered and the lost. Author Paul Cooper wrote that, “...ruins remind us that the human body will one day degrade, that life is fragile and fleeting” — perhaps this is the big draw for me — perhaps ‘ruins’ remind me of my own mortality and my own life story.⁵ Cooper goes on to say that ruins often fill our lives with “...evocative melancholy and form moments of stillness in our hectic lives.”⁶ This idea, this connectiveness of sadness and reality, and this need for solemn contemplation is in direct conversation with my work. We, as a society are often too busy, hurried — we are always striving, moving — easily triggered, annoyed, frustrated — complacent and numb — but we need to stop — for a moment — take the time to accept, to reflect, and be empathetic to those around us. The crumpling walls of the subway — are the ‘modern ruins’ of our infrastructure and our society. Captivating and evocative — these ‘modern ruins’ have preoccupied my mind for years. They have inspired me to deliberate, provoked me to investigate and motivated me to create a piece of work that encapsulates tragedy, yet simultaneously encourages a shift in how we think.

²Dillon, Brian. *Ruins*. MIT Press: London, 2011.18

³Dillon, Brian. *Ruins*. MIT Press: London, 2011.18

⁴Solnit, Rebecca. “The Ruins of Memory”. *Ruins*. MIT Press: London, 2011. 151

⁵Cooper, Paul. “The Timeless Allure of Ruins”. *Culture*. January 16, 2018.

⁶Cooper, Paul. “The Timeless Allure of Ruins”. *Culture*. January 16, 2018.

In addressing trauma, I personally find it comforting to provide a counterbalance to what often is an overwhelming sense of melancholy — and I believe it is through reflection and consideration that one can find hope and compassion. One of the aims of my thesis project is to bring about awareness — to construct a type of monument — a memorial (embedded with symbols of loss and grief) — that raises questions, exposes truths, initiates contemplation and instigates empathy. Artist Nancy Good once stated that, “Empathy is key as it speaks the language of connection, connection to the life experiences of the viewer. We are all connected in pain, joy, fear, wonder, hunger, yearning...Empathy in art banishes isolation and invites healing.”⁷ It is this philosophy that is engrained in my practice — that inspires my artistic process — that gives me purpose — and that led me to discover, unveil and create *Injury At Track Level*.

⁷Good, Nancy. “I Asked Artists About Empathy: Here is What They Said...” *Huffpost*. January 15, 2017.