



## Hannah Huntley

LISA: Your work often features anthropomorphized creatures and playful patterns. How do these elements help you explore complex themes like societal beauty standards and chronic illness?

HANNAH: When I'm working with difficult themes that are emotionally challenging, or hard, using cheerful color schemes and a nostalgic, illustrative style helps me camouflage some of those negative thoughts and emotions with comedy and sometimes satirically cheerful exteriors. These things help the audience view the work without too many preconceived notions about the subject matter. I hope it helps people connect more quickly to the work. It's a style I've developed over the years, and it is also a form of self comfort. Because my current work is often about my experience with chronic illness and the periods in my life when I am homebound, anthropomorphism can help put an emphasis on the importance of home and the objects around me. The objects around me become characters in the story of my day when socializing or leaving the house isn't possible. I think making anthropomorphic work can make the mundane, painful, or scary parts of life a little more friendly and make small, everyday moments magical.

LISA: Satire and comedy play a significant role in your work. How do you use humor to address the more serious issues you explore, and what impact do you hope it has on your audience?

HANNAH: I love funny work. I love when I see a painting, or sculpture, or video and it immediately makes me smile or laugh. If people can open up and laugh about something, they're engaged with that thing right away, their "ah ha" moment with the work is immediate. I want my work to be approachable and engaging for people in and outside of the fine art world and humor is something that feels kind of universal. I especially love when sadness, or discomfort is cut with humor or satire. The humor is an attempt to comfort myself and my audience when talking about subjects that are hard or emotionally challenging. I started doing this in my work because it's what I do in my own life. When talking to other people about health problems over and over again or about just difficult societal problems I found people get tired of the negativity really fast, or are looking for some kind of immediate solution. When making work about something awful that I don't have a solution for I think it's helpful to make people feel at ease initially and through repetition, satire, overexaggerated cheerfulness, and performativity the exhaustion and desperation of my characters starts to shine through. I think my work is kind of desperately saying: This is going on and it's so horrible and I want to talk to you about it but I see you're uncomfortable so now I have to make a joke to put the conversation at ease, and make you believe it's okay even though it's not.



*Betty*, 2019

LISA: Your first show, *Imperfect Alterations*, focuses on the pressure women face regarding beauty standards. How has your perspective on this theme evolved since then?

HANNAH: I started grad school two years ago thinking I'm not going to make work about that, I was ready to switch things up. I thought I would solely focus on my experience with chronic illness but in focusing on my illness, I realized that the themes of beauty ideals and society's expectations for women are intertwined with themes of chronic illness. When I get really sick I often lose weight and a large portion of my hair. How some people responded to this change in appearance led me to the conclusion that many people see women's beauty as their most valuable asset and even if I could not work or contribute to society in times of illness, if I was beautiful I still had something to offer, something of value to be traded for love and care. If I lost that too I didn't have anything to offer the world. I realized that most of my work is about this fear of failure, and the constant feeling that I am not living up to impossible expectations and feeling valueless.

So a lot of my thesis exhibition work, especially with the piece *Mommy Long Legs' Big Break*. She's a burlesque spider and she's got large, exaggerated breasts and makeup, and she's all dressed up, trying to look as appealing to us as possible. Even though she's physically breaking down and in some sort of pain because her legs are physically breaking off her, she's trying her best to look beautiful and look appealing, like it's the only value she has left. She can't move, she can't perform, she is in pain, but she is still trying desperately to please her audience.



*Mommy Long Legs' Big Break*



Still Frame from *Mommy Long Legs' Big Break* Video

LISA: Your current work delves into chronic fatigue syndrome and autoimmune disorders. How do you balance the personal and universal aspects of these experiences in your art?

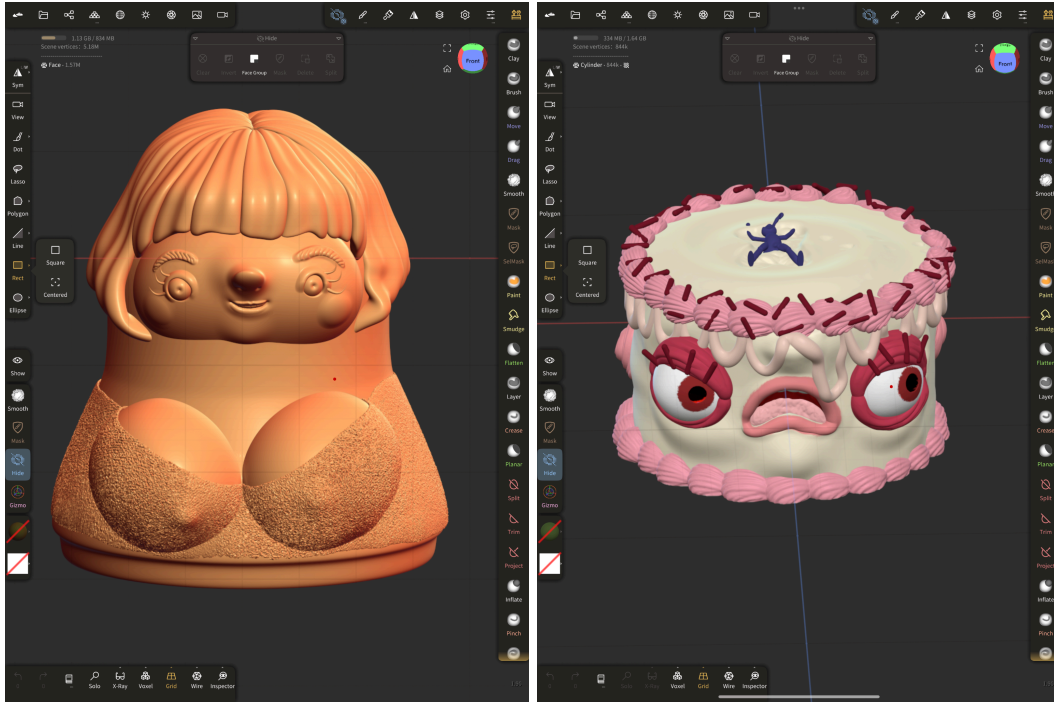
HANNAH: I found out it was really hard to be this vulnerable and personal with the experiences behind my work. It was work I needed to make and am proud of but I am rethinking my approach in the future. I think after 2 years of having to repeat the same traumatic health narrative to strangers was challenging, and it was really hard to be constantly vulnerable with the work. I think that partially had to do with the structure of being in a graduate program, partially had to do with me learning to distance myself from the work.

I want to keep talking about themes around chronic illness while I have the ability to do so because I know so many women like me are not well enough to make this work and I would love for them to see something that they relate to and see themselves in. I also think it is really crucial to make work about chronic illness because our stories and experiences are usually tucked away out of the public eye. I think going into the future, maybe even just for the most immediate future, I'm gonna reel in the personal and autobiographical elements of the work.

LISA: Can you briefly talk about the bedridden time during the health relapse? How did this period reshape your approach to creating art, both technically and conceptually?

HANNAH: I have several autoimmune disorders that can leave me pretty sick and in a good deal of pain. I am always experiencing some flu-like symptoms and tend to go through periods where my symptoms are extremely aggravated. My last bad period left me pretty much bedridden for about two years. Once I started to get a little better I needed to make work about this because it's really affected me and I met many people with similar experiences. I wanted to make work about it for myself and for those people, but it was hard on my body. I was previously a printmaker but couldn't handle the long hours standing and crouching in the lab. I initially tried to switch to embroidery and fiber art because I could do all of that work sitting or laying down. Even that can be too much physically a lot of the time. Because of this I'm trying to move my practice into the digital space as much as possible with digital drawing, video editing, 3D modeling and 3D printing. Making my practice more accessible to me has been really freeing and reinvigorating. This way is also amazing for prototyping and making work that moves and needs to complete a certain function. This will be especially useful when designing puppets. All the puppet work that I had done before was hand sculpted out of polymer clay. And so now, I can make puppets that move perfectly and are designed to lock into each other. It's definitely going to open a lot of doors.





3D modeling process preview

LISA: As a co-founder of non-profit called Laika Press, how has this involvement with community art spaces influenced your personal work and artistic direction?

HANNAH: I used to be almost exclusively a printmaker, and I have a real passion for printmaking and communal art spaces. I think community art spaces are a really great way to form bonds and get inspiration from other artists. I think they are necessary to keep art accessible to everyone in a community. I'm not currently involved in any community art spaces, but I would like to change that in the future. I don't know if I could start another nonprofit or be involved to the extent that I was, but I would love to get more involved to some degree and have a deep respect and admiration for all of the incredible people who keep them running.

LISA: You've expressed interest in expanding into video work and performance art. What excites you most about these mediums, and how do you see them complementing your current practice?

HANNAH: I absolutely want to do more video and performance art! I don't think I want to perform with my body ever but I have been experimenting with making and puppeteering puppets. It is an incredible feeling to be able to give life to an object you made. I would love to perform them live but I have terrible stage fright and am a pretty amateur puppeteer so making videos of the performances is much better for my workflow. I would love to expand my editing skills and build more extensive sets for my puppets in the future. I also would also love to explore animatronics so that my puppets can move on their own in a gallery someday. I am also interested in making different kinds of framing devices to go around the screen so the screen itself is a more sculptural object. I think having some kind of moving picture will always be a part of my work moving forward. I really am passionate about it.

LISA: Looking ahead, how do you envision the intersection of your gallery practice and potential work in children's media? What new dimensions do you hope to explore in these fields?

HANNAH: I hope to work in both! I adore children and a lot of my inspiration comes from children's toys and television. My fine art work is visually inspired by children's media but the themes up to this point are definitely designed for an adult audience. But I adore storytelling and illustration and would love to dabble in children's book illustration and toy design someday. I think my style would lend itself well to children's media and I think it would be an honor to make work for kids.

