In the Space Between: A Felting Journey of Tactile Healing

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A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design (MDes) in Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design (IAMD)

Ignite Gallery, 100 McCaul St, March 18-22, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2026

Abstract

In the Space Between: A Felting Journey of Tactile Healing examines how the tactile process of wool felting can materialize the psychological transformation of pain into temporary relief. The project emerges from a long-standing skin-picking habit, which functions as both self-harm and self-soothing. This contradiction reveals the paradox between pain and healing, demonstrating that pain can also lead to positive psychological outcomes. By challenging the general assumption that pain is solely negative, this research proposes an alternative interpretation that frames pain as a catalyst for emotional repair. The central research question guiding this project is: *How can the tactile process of wool felting demonstrate the transformation of pain into healing, the intangible psychological repair?*

Drawing on personal embodied experience and material experimentation, the resulting exhibition presents a series of biomorphic felted forms, including works shaped through different durations of wet felting, as well as pieces that unfold through layered separation, irregular edges, and cut surfaces that reveal hidden interiors, foregrounding process over resolution. Repetitive actions such as piercing, rubbing, rolling, and shaping reflect the gradual and uneven shift from pain to healing. Variation in densities and visible traces of labour show how time and effort consolidate into form, positioning healing as an ongoing state rather than a completed outcome.

Through material engagement and embodied experience, this exhibition enters broader conversations about voluntary pain, emotional regulation, and the role of craft in emotional processing. Additionally, the exhibition offers a tangible visualization of an internal psychological cycle, proposing felting as both a method of inquiry and a site where pain becomes a catalyst for transformation.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my primary advisor, Nithikul Nimkulrat, and my secondary advisor, Julia Rose Sutherland, for their guidance and support throughout the development of this thesis project. Their feedback shaped the direction of my work in countless ways, and their help during the installation of my exhibition was invaluable.

I would like to thank my family for supporting me and my studies from Tianjin, China. I am especially grateful to my mother, who took care of arranging the shipment of wool from China to Toronto so that I could focus more fully on making my work.

I would also like to thank my friends who gave me both emotional and practical support throughout this process. To Wenxi Lyu, Yuxuan Lin (Sherry), Yuting Zhou, Jiayi Wei (Mustard), Huiling Yan, Ziyi Wang (Kiki), Chaewon Gim (Chloe), and Hayeon Lee: you encouraged me when I felt lost and anxious, affirmed my abilities when I doubted them, and offered help whenever I needed it. Without you, my thesis exhibition would not have come together as smoothly as it did.

Finally, I would like to thank Shanwei Fu for serving as my exhibition support. His detailed suggestions on installation and his hands-on help in setting up the exhibition made a real difference in the final presentation of my work.

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Introduction

This project originates from a long-standing habit of skin-picking. This behaviour did not emerge through conscious choice, nor can I clearly identify a specific moment when it began. Instead, it developed gradually alongside my emotional responses to stress, anxiety, and situations where I experienced a lack of control. My earliest memory of this dual sensation can be traced back to my elementary school years, when I struggled to adapt to the highly structured and exam-oriented education system in China. At that time, I was unable to adjust to the increasing academic pressure and frequent assessments. Compared to my earlier childhood, which was relatively unstructured and free, this sudden shift created a strong sense of discomfort and inadequacy.

As a quiet and introverted child, I found it difficult to express fear or frustration verbally. When I was criticized for working too slowly on homework, I often remained silent, internalizing anxiety without any visible reaction. Only after these moments had passed did I realize that the skin around my thumb had already been torn apart unconsciously. Even after the immediate stress subsided, I continued the act. I focused intensely on smoothing the uneven surface of my skin. This repetitive action redirected my attention. Instead of anticipating further reprimand, my awareness shifted toward a controlled tactile process. In retrospect, skin-picking created a dissociative pathway, allowing me to move from emotional distress toward a manageable physical sensation.

Over time, this behaviour evolved into a private and embodied practice that exists between harm and comfort. When loose skin or hangnails appear on my fingers, I feel a strong urge to remove them. The irregular texture becomes difficult to ignore and creates both physical and psychological discomfort. The act of pulling the skin is painful, but the pain is temporary. What follows is a smoother surface, a sense of order, and a quiet feeling of relief. The calmness does not occur despite the pain, but rather through it.

Throughout my life, many aspects of my identity have changed, including my

personality, appearance, and values. However, two elements have remained constant: my interest in art and this habit of skin-picking. This behaviour has gradually become a stable emotional anchor in the presence of uncertainty. When I feel dryness or uneven texture on my skin, I experience discomfort because it represents something outside my control. By removing the skin, I re-establish a sense of order. When I am anxious, I repeat this action rhythmically, which creates familiarity and stabilizes my emotional state. Similar to how others use fidget tools or tactile objects for stress relief, I engage with the surface of my own skin.

At the same time, I often hold the belief that negative emotions should be quickly regulated and resolved. As an adult, I expect myself to manage anxiety efficiently. When I fail to do so, I experience guilt. In this context, pain becomes a form of self-regulation. It acts as both punishment and compensation. Even when I do not make progress on tasks, the act of causing pain produces a sense of completion. As the skin gradually becomes smoother, I experience a subtle sense of achievement, which restores a temporary feeling of control.

This behaviour continues into adulthood and remains embedded in daily life. It is sometimes triggered by emotional tension, but it can also arise simply from tactile irregularities. While not always conscious, it is deeply connected to my emotional state. Skin-picking functions as a response system that transforms psychological discomfort into a structured physical experience. Pain, in this sense, becomes contained. It has a clear beginning and end, offering closure that emotional stress often lacks.

Scientific research provides a framework for understanding this experience. Studies on pain-offset relief suggest that pain is not solely negative. The removal of pain can produce increased pleasantness and activate reward-related brain regions, particularly the nucleus accumbens (Franklin et al. 525). Similarly, Bastian, Jetten, and Fasoli demonstrate that experiences of guilt can be reduced following pain offset (Bastian et al. 335). These findings indicate that relief itself carries emotional value. In addition, research shows that attention and distraction significantly influence pain

perception (Porreca and Navratilova S45). Rather than eliminating discomfort, shifts in attention reshape how pain is experienced and processed. This aligns closely with my own experience, where attention moves from anxiety toward tactile sensation, resulting in temporary emotional stability.

These theoretical insights form the conceptual foundation of *In the Space Between: A Felting Journey of Tactile Healing*. This thesis investigates the following primary research question:

- How can the tactile process of wool felting demonstrate the transformation of pain into healing, the intangible psychological repair?

To further explore this inquiry, the project is guided by three sub-questions:

- How can the process of healing be visualized through stages of material transformation?
- How do tactile sensations such as piercing, friction, and resistance shape the maker's emotional experience during the felting process?
- How can wool, as a soft yet labour-intensive fibre, carry or register internal emotional states?

Felting was selected as the central medium because it closely mirrors the psychological structure of skin-picking. Through both needle felting and wet felting, loose fibres are repeatedly penetrated, compressed, and bound together. These actions involve "damage" in order to create stability. Destruction and construction occur simultaneously. The process is physically demanding and occasionally painful, yet it produces a grounding effect. As the hands engage in repetitive motion, the mind gradually settles. Emotional tension is reduced, and focus emerges through rhythm.

By translating lived experiences of pain and relief into material processes, this project aims to visualize healing not as a final outcome, but as an ongoing condition. Healing, like felt, is uneven and layered. It retains traces of pressure, labour, and transformation. Rather than attempting to erase pain, this research explores how one can remain with it, work through it, and recognize its potential to generate calm and

psychological repair.

This thesis exhibition also emphasizes audience engagement. I intend to present the work in a way that allows viewers to physically touch the material. This tactile interaction is essential, as it enables audiences to experience the coexistence of pain and healing, as well as the subtle transitions between them. It suggests that healing does not need to be complete in order to be meaningful. In some cases, healing may remain ongoing without a clear resolution.

In the exhibition, wool is used as the primary material, mainly through wet felting techniques. In certain works, such as the piece of referencing bruising, silk organza is incorporated to support structural layering. Needle felting is also applied selectively to increase density in specific areas. By inserting non-felting materials such as plastic sheets between layers of wool, and later cutting into the felted surface, I create effects of separation and exposure. These layered interventions simulate the appearance of peeling or lifted skin, further reinforcing the conceptual relationship between material transformation and bodily experience.

The works in this exhibition are produced primarily through wet felting, with needle felting applied selectively to refine surface density and structure. Each piece is built in layers: wool fibres are laid out, separated by plastic sheet barriers, and then agitated with soapy water over extended periods of time until the layers bond and consolidate. Once dried, the plastic barriers are removed and the surface is cut open to reveal the inner layers beneath. This act of cutting is central to the work. It transforms concealment into exposure, and mirrors the way skin-picking brings what is held beneath the surface into the open. The physical demands of this process, the long hours of bending, rubbing, and applying pressure, are not incidental. They are part of what the work is about.

This paper will further examine the methodology, material processes, exhibition strategies, and conceptual framework of the project, demonstrating how tactile making can function as a bridge between pain and healing.

Methodology

This research adopts a practice-based methodology (Gherardi 352) in which personal experience, theoretical understanding, and material exploration are closely interconnected. The project begins from embodied experience, specifically my long-term habit of skin-picking, and develops through a process that moves between observation, interpretation, and material translation. Rather than separating making from thinking, knowledge in this research emerges through the continuous interaction between the body, the material, and conceptual reflection.

This approach is structured through three interconnected components: autobiographical reflection, a supporting scientific framework, and material-based exploration through felting.

Autobiographical Approach

Autobiographical reflection plays a central role in this research as a method for observing and understanding my own habitual behaviour. Rather than connecting my experience outward to broader social or cultural patterns, I turn inward, treating my own body and its habits as the primary site of inquiry. As Paul de Man suggests, autobiography operates not as a fixed genre but as a mode of self-understanding — a process in which the self becomes both the subject and the object of reflection (de Man 921). I draw on this idea loosely: my research is not a literary autobiography, but it shares the same reflexive orientation. Instead of treating skin-picking as an isolated or purely negative action, I approach it as a form of embodied knowledge that reflects patterns of emotional regulation.

I documented and reflected on the frequency, location, and intensity of my skin-picking behaviour for a week (Figure 1). Through this process, I observed that the behaviour is strongly connected to my emotional state. During periods of heightened anxiety, I tend to pick my skin multiple times a day. The action is almost always focused on my thumbs, typically using my index and middle fingers. The

affected area expands as anxiety increases, at times extending around the entire thumb, approaching the fingerprint and joint.

Figure 1. Documentation for thumb finger-picking behaviour

I also observed that the behaviour is usually concentrated on one hand and only extends to both hands when anxiety becomes more intense. After the act, my emotional state consistently improves compared to before. The most noticeable sense of relief occurs two to three days later, when new skin has formed and the surface becomes smooth again. This newly formed skin is slightly harder, similar to a callus created through repeated friction. This temporary smoothness reduces the presence of hangnails and interrupts the cycle for a short period, until irregular texture appears again.

I also noticed that the picking always begins at one specific point, usually where the skin is driest or most uneven, and gradually extends outward from there. It does not happen all at once. This incremental quality is consistent with how I experience anxiety itself, where a small discomfort builds gradually until it becomes harder to ignore. The physical boundary of the affected area on my thumb reflects, in a way, how far the emotional tension has spread at that moment.

These observations suggest that skin-picking is not random but structured. It follows a cycle of tension, action, relief, and temporary stabilization. Through this method, my body becomes both the subject and the site of investigation. Autobiographical reflection allows me to connect these personal patterns to broader questions about pain, control, and emotional regulation. It also provided a foundation for the material decisions in this project. The cycle I observed in my own behaviour,

the movement from irregular texture to smooth surface through a process that involves discomfort, directly informed how I approach felting. Both begin with a state of unevenness and arrive at a condition of temporary stability through sustained physical effort. By recognizing this connection through autobiographical reflection, I was able to use my personal experience not just as subject matter but as a structural guide for how the work is done.

Scientific and Sensory Framework

While this research is grounded in personal experience, it is supported by existing scientific and sensory-based studies that help explain why such behaviours produce relief. Research on pain-offset relief demonstrates that the removal of pain can activate reward-related responses in the brain, particularly in the nucleus accumbens, producing a sense of pleasure and emotional release (Franklin et al. 525). This provides a framework for understanding how pain, in certain contexts, can function as a regulating mechanism rather than purely harm. Similarly, studies have shown that experiences of guilt can be reduced following the offset of physical pain, suggesting that pain carries a compensatory emotional function that extends beyond the immediate sensation itself (Bastian et al. 335). These findings are significant for my research because they challenge the assumption that pain is solely destructive. Instead, they point toward a more complex relationship in which pain and relief are closely linked, and where the cessation of discomfort generates its own form of emotional value.

Research on attention and distraction further supports this understanding. Studies show that attention significantly influences how pain is perceived and processed, and that shifts in focus can reshape the emotional impact of painful experiences (Porreca and Navratilova S45). This aligns closely with my own experience of skin-picking, where my attention moves away from anxiety and toward a controlled tactile sensation, producing a temporary but noticeable stabilization of my emotional state. The act does not eliminate the source of stress. Instead, it

redirects awareness toward something immediate, physical, and manageable. This mechanism of attentional redirection is also relevant to how I think about the viewer's experience in the exhibition, where touching the felt surfaces may similarly shift focus from internal emotional tension toward external sensory engagement.

In addition to this, tactile experience plays an important role in emotional regulation. Everyday objects such as stress-relief toys rely on texture, repetition, and physical interaction to shift attention and reduce anxiety (Liu). Engaging with uneven or responsive surfaces can redirect focus away from abstract stress toward immediate sensory feedback (Liu). This shift in attention creates a grounding effect and stabilizes emotional states. The parallel between these objects and my felt works is intentional. By presenting surfaces with varying densities and textures that viewers are invited to touch, the exhibition draws on a similar principle. The difference is that the tactile interaction in my work is embedded within a broader conceptual framework, where the textures themselves are products of processes that mirror the cycle of pain and relief.

Colour also contributes to this sensory experience. Research has shown that colours with high lightness and low chroma, particularly cool tones such as blue, green, and lavender, are more likely to evoke calm emotional responses (Bartram et al. 1364). This understanding informs my material and colour choices. The inner layers of my works use pastel tones produced through drum carding, blending colours such as soft lavender, baby blue, and light green. These are the layers that become visible when the outer surface is cut open. By pairing neutral or dark outer layers with softer colours underneath, the works create a visual experience where the act of revealing is met with calm rather than intensity. The colour choices are not decorative. They are part of a deliberate sensory strategy that aims to produce an environment where the viewer encounters vulnerability without being overwhelmed by it.

Material-Based Exploration

Material exploration is the primary way in which this research is developed and tested. I searched for a material that could replicate the process of tension, disruption, and stabilization observed in skin-picking, and found that wool felting closely mirrors this structure.

In needle felting, I use needles of different thicknesses to control the structure of the wool. Thicker needles are used to quickly shape the base form, allowing for more forceful and less controlled movement. Finer needles are used to refine the surface, requiring more precision and careful control to avoid visible marks. This shift from force to control reflects a transition from impulsive action to focused attention.

In wet felting, I tested a range of variables, including the thickness of wool layers, water temperature, types of soap, ratios of soap to water, and the duration and intensity of rubbing. These variations allowed me to observe how different conditions affect the density, texture, and structural stability of the felt. Through repeated testing, I developed a process that balances control and unpredictability.

To create layered effects, I inserted materials that cannot be felted, such as plastic sheets, between different layers of wool. After the felting process is complete, I cut into the surface and removed these internal barriers. This reveals the inner layers of wool and creates openings that resemble lifted or peeling skin. These interventions allow the material to physically embody the idea of exposure and internal complexity.

Colour plays an important role in this process. I intentionally avoid using highly saturated or literal colours such as skin tones or red, which would immediately direct the viewer toward a specific interpretation. Instead, I use more neutral outer layers (Figure 2) combined with softer, more colourful inner layers. The inner layers are often composed of blended wool using a drum carder, creating pastel tones such as lavender, baby blue, and soft green (Figure 3). These colours are chosen to support a calm and controlled emotional response, rather than shock or discomfort (Bartram et al.).

Figure 2. Neutral-toned wool for outer layers used across all works in the exhibition.

Figure 3. Pastel-coloured wool for inner layers used across all works in the exhibition.

I also experimented with colour distribution. Using pure colours resulted in surfaces that felt visually flat. Attempting gradients through layering produced transitions that appeared too abrupt. Random distribution of fibres created more organic variation but made it difficult to control thickness and consistency (Figure 4). Through this process, I found that pre-blending colours using a drum carder provided the most balanced result, allowing both visual complexity and material stability.

Figure 4. Blended wool after using drum carder

In addition to wool, I intended to introduce transparency and create multiple suspended layers within the installation. I explored the integration of other fabrics such as cheesecloth and silk organza and selected natural silk organza because its subtle wrinkles align with the organic and biomorphic qualities of the work. After reducing excessive creases, the remaining folds resemble the texture of skin. The perforations created through needle felting further enhance this association, suggesting surfaces that have been pierced or altered.

The making process itself is physically demanding. Needle felting requires repetitive and forceful arm movement, which often results in soreness in the arms and shoulders (Figure 5). Wet felting requires extended periods of bending, rubbing, and applying pressure, leading to physical strain in the back. These sensations are not incidental. They extend and amplify the experience of pain that originates in skin-picking, allowing me to engage more deeply with the relationship between physical discomfort and emotional regulation.

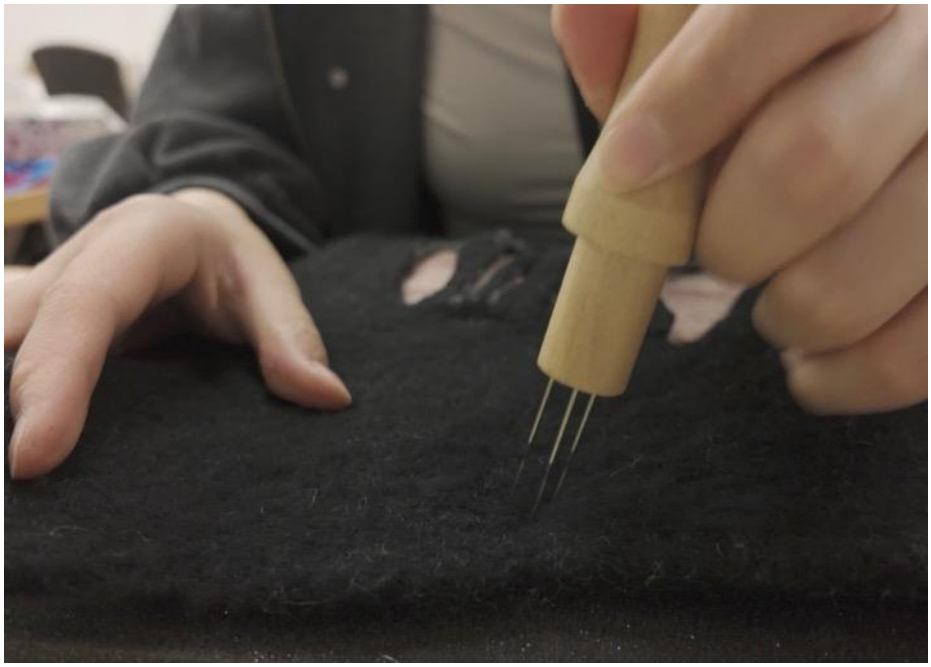

Figure 5. Needle felting in progress

Through this process, material becomes more than a medium. It becomes a way of thinking through the body. The repetitive actions, resistance of the material, and gradual transformation all contribute to a form of knowledge that cannot be fully separated from making itself. Material exploration, in this context, functions as both experimentation and reflection, allowing the research to move continuously between sensation, form, and meaning.

Artistic References

Both personal experience and broader cultural histories of textile work inform this thesis. Felting is one of the oldest textile techniques, with origins in many different geographic and cultural contexts. As Berthold Laufer explores in *The Early History of Felt*, felt has been used not only for warmth and clothing but also for architectural and ritual purposes, including yurts, wall panels, and religious objects (18–21). It offers protection through its thickness and density, while its softness creates a sense of intimacy. Mary E. Burkett's arguments on the Pazyryk felt artifacts also show that felt has long been a medium for identity, status, and symbolic expression (111–112). These histories challenge the idea that felt is rudimentary or marginal. Instead, they present it as a deeply expressive and culturally significant material. Based on these histories, I understand felt as a material that has always carried a kind of tension between the intimate and the monumental, the utilitarian and the symbolic. Because it appears in both sacred ritual and everyday life, I consider it uniquely suited to carry emotional and bodily resonance.

My own cultural background also shapes this inquiry. Growing up in Tianjin, China, I encountered felting less as an artisanal practice and more as a domestic or industrial one. But further reflection reveals that felt has long been present in East Asian traditions, even if it is not widely acknowledged within mainstream art discourse. This material has appeared in various forms, including clothing, utilitarian objects, and ceremonial materials, all of which carry both aesthetic and emotional significance (Laufer 2). Although these practices are not always labelled as art, they reveal how textile work often exists in the realm of the overlooked. This kind of work is frequently coded as feminine, functional, or folkloric, but it is central to cultural survival and embodied memory (Godzińska 59). This trauma-informed, materially grounded framework allows me to situate my own felting practice within a lineage of material-based research into memory, trauma, and healing.

In addition to these cultural and historical foundations, my understanding of felting as an emotionally and physically meaningful practice has been shaped by the

work of several contemporary artists. Lisa Klakulak's exploration of material memory and internal structure helped me think about felt as a medium that holds and compresses experience. Catherine Blackburn's use of labour-intensive beadwork as a model for repetitive, accumulative making informed how I understand sustained physical effort as a way of engaging with personal experience. Stephanie Metz's emphasis on tactility and viewer interaction shaped my decision to invite physical engagement to the exhibition. Each of these artists demonstrates, in different ways, how textile and material practices can carry bodily memory, process pain, and communicate experiences that are difficult to express through language alone. Their work has provided both conceptual grounding and practical direction for my own felting practice.

Material Memory in Lisa Klakulak’s Practice

Artist Lisa Klakulak's work has been an important source of inspiration for how I understand the relationship between material, body, and memory. In her exhibition *Room for a View* (2022) at S. Tucker Cooke Gallery, Klakulak explores the connection between brain and body memory through the physical properties of wool, particularly its tendency to shrink, contort, and reduce internal air space during the felting process (Figure 6). Through repeated agitation and compression, loose fibres become dense structures. This gradual reduction of space offers a way to think about how experiences are absorbed and held within the body (Klakulak).

Figure 6. Lisa Klakulak, Vent, 2019, From Room for a View, S. Tucker Cooke Gallery, UNC Asheville, 2022. Photo credit: Steve Mann. https://aah.unca.edu/exhibitions/s-tucker-cooke-gallery/2022/lisa-klakulak-room-for-a-view

Her attention to the internal structure of felt, especially its porosity and its capacity to change under pressure, has influenced how I approach wool not just as a surface but as a material with depth and internal conditions. The idea that material can contain space, and that this space can be compressed or altered, helped me think about felting as a process that reflects psychological states rather than simply producing form. In Klakulak's work, density is not only a visual quality but also a spatial and emotional condition.

Klakulak also connects material transformation to psychosomatic experience. By organizing her installation in relation to the body, she creates an environment where sculpture and spatial arrangement together suggest how memory, emotion, and physical sensation are connected. These ideas encouraged me to pay closer attention to how felting changes not only the surface of wool but also its internal structure through pressure, friction, and repetition. This expanded way of thinking about material, where form, space, and bodily reference work together, has informed my own understanding of how felt can function beyond object-making.

While Klakulak's work emphasizes how memory and experience can be held

within dense material forms, her approach has also opened a way for me to think about how these conditions might shift. Her use of wool as a responsive and transformative material has shaped my understanding of felting as a process that can carry emotional meaning. Building on this, my work focuses on how material transformation can suggest not only accumulation but also release, transition, and the possibility of change over time.

Transformative Labour in Catherine Blackburn's Work

Artist Catherine Blackburn, a member of the English River First Nation (Dënesųłinḗ), provides another important reference for understanding how repetitive textile labour can carry and transform personal experience. Her practice is rooted in cultural and historical contexts specific to her experience as an Indigenous artist, including the legacies of colonization and the residential school system in Canada. In her piece But there's no scar? II (2019), Blackburn uses beadwork and traditional adornment techniques to address these histories through the body and through making. However, what I draw from her work is not this specific cultural context, but rather her approach to labour-intensive beadwork as a physical and accumulative process. The piece takes the form of a wearable beaded bruise, where materials like glass beads and hide are assembled through slow, painstaking repetition (Figure 7). It is this quality of sustained, embodied making that is relevant to my own practice.

Figure 7. Catherine Blackburn in collaboration with Tenille Campbell, *But There's No Scar? II*, 2020, From In Keeping with Myself, Portrait Gallery of Canada, portraitcanada.ca/exhibitions/in-keeping-with-myself/catherine-blackburn/.

Blackburn's approach has influenced how I think about the relationship between repetitive labour and personal experience. In her work, beadwork is not only decorative but also accumulative. Each bead is placed through a slow and controlled process using two-thread applied beadwork techniques inherited from her grandmother, and a single piece can take anywhere from tens to hundreds of hours to complete (Blackburn). The physical demands of this kind of making, the sustained posture, the small repetitive movements of threading and stitching over long periods of time, mean that the labour itself becomes inseparable from the finished object (Figure 8). This kind of sustained, methodical attention to making is what I draw from her practice. This emphasis on labour as a meaningful and embodied action has informed my own understanding of making. It suggests that physical effort, when repeated over time, can reshape not only material but also emotional experience.

Figure 8. Catherine Blackburn in collaboration with Tenille Campbell, But There's No Scar? II, 2020, detail. catherineblackburn.com/new-but-theres-no-scar-i-and-ii.

Her use of materials also highlights an important transformation. Hard and rigid elements like beads are assembled into flexible, textile-like surfaces. This shift from rigidity to softness reflects a movement from tension toward adaptability. It shows how materials can be reconfigured to carry different emotional meanings, allowing trauma to be held, altered, and reinterpreted rather than simply represented (Figure 7). This perspective has shaped my approach to felting. While working with wool, I became increasingly aware that material transformation is not only about form but also about the accumulation of actions over time. Like beadwork, felting relies on repetition, pressure, and sustained attention. Through these processes, the material gradually changes in density, texture, and structure. The surface becomes more stable, but it also carries visible traces of the labour that produced it.

At the same time, Blackburn's work encouraged me to consider how material can hold both vulnerability and protection. The idea of a "beaded bruise" suggests that marks of damage do not need to be hidden. They can instead be transformed into something that carries meaning and presence (Figure 7). In my own work, this idea is extended through layering and revealing processes. By exposing inner layers

of felt and allowing different textures and colours to emerge, I explore how internal states can become visible through material transformation.

Through Blackburn's practice, I came to understand textile work as a space where labour, memory, and material are inseparable. Her work shows that repetitive making is not only a technical process but a way of engaging with deeply personal experience through the body (Blackburn). This understanding supports my own investigation into how tactile processes can translate pain into a form that is not erased but reshaped into something that can be held, observed, and experienced over time.

Tactility and Embodied Interaction in Stephanie Metz's Work

Artist Stephanie Metz's work has been highly influential in shaping my understanding of tactility, bodily reference, and viewer interaction within textile practice. Metz creates sculptural forms through needle felting, building dense, organic structures through thousands of repeated needle penetrations. Her works often resemble skin, bone, or other biological forms, producing surfaces that feel both familiar and slightly unsettling (Metz). This ambiguity between recognition and discomfort allows the material to evoke a strong bodily response.

Her process emphasizes repetition and accumulation. Each stab of the needle gradually binds loose fibres into cohesive structures. This transformation from softness into density reflects how repeated physical action can generate stability and form (Metz). The process itself carries a certain intensity, as the act of piercing is both controlled and forceful. This has influenced how I understand repetitive labour not only as a technical necessity but also as a conceptual and embodied action.

Metz's work also places strong emphasis on tactility and sensory engagement. In her *InTouch* (2020) project (Figure 9), viewers are invited to physically interact with the work, highlighting the importance of touch as a way of experiencing material and connecting with it. This approach has directly informed my own exhibition decisions. I chose to include a sign that explicitly invites viewers to

touch my work and engage with it physically. Tactility becomes a way to establish a connection between the viewer and the work, allowing the experience to move beyond visual observation into embodied interaction (Figure 10). This focus on touch is particularly significant in relation to my research on pain and healing. Since my project is rooted in sensory experience, especially the relationship between physical sensation and emotional regulation, I consider touch to be a crucial entry point for the audience. Through interaction, viewers can engage with the material conditions that reflect my own making process. The contrast between tightly felted, dense surfaces and more loosely felted, soft areas create a range of tactile experiences that can be explored through touch.

Figure 9. Stephanie Metz, InTouch Hanging Pods installation view, de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara, California. stephaniemetz.com/in-the-studio/2024/1/5/phct7d3o5s1h9n6uy6bu1kebqu0q98.

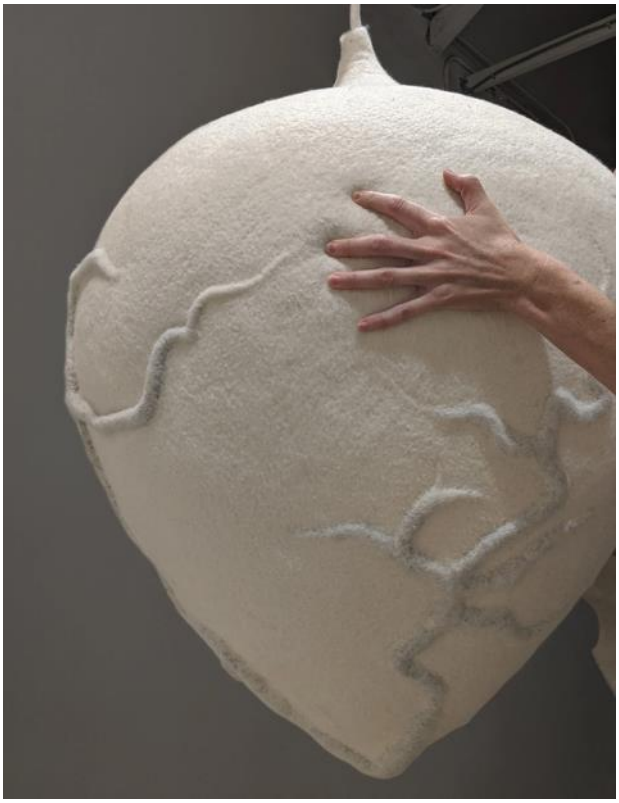

Figure 10. Stephanie Metz, *InTouch Hanging Pod: Veiny Bulb*. stephaniemetz.com/in-the-studio/2024/1/5/phct7d3o5s1h9n6uy6bu1kebqu0q98.

Metz's work also encouraged me to think about how material can evoke empathy through the body. By creating forms that resemble living tissue, she activates a sense of bodily awareness in the viewer. This has influenced my interest in using wool to produce a similar kind of recognition, where texture and density can suggest sensations rather than directly represent them. In my work, this extends into the idea that tactile interaction can function in a way similar to stress-relief objects. Through repeated touching, rubbing, or holding, viewers may experience a reduction in tension and anxiety. By engaging with Metz's practice, I came to understand that material not only communicates visually but also physically. Her emphasis on tactility, repetition, and interaction has shaped my approach to felting as a process that can be felt as much as it is seen. This perspective supports my broader investigation into how sensory experience, particularly touch, can translate pain into a form of calm, allowing the audience to participate in a process of embodied understanding.

Body of Work

The exhibition, titled *In the Space Between: A Felting Journey of Tactile Healing*, is composed of six felt-based works, *Vessel*, *Bruises*, *Skin*, *Spine*, and two wet felted duration pieces, as well as a looping video projection, that together form a cohesive exploration of the cycle between pain and healing. Rather than functioning as isolated pieces, the works are designed to be experienced as interconnected stages within an ongoing process. Each work reflects a different condition within this cycle, where tension, pressure, and disruption gradually shift toward moments of stabilization, softness, and temporary calm.

All the works are installed at approximately eye-level height while remaining physically accessible to viewers of different heights (Figure 11). This decision is intentional, as tactile engagement is central to the experience of the exhibition. To encourage this, I placed a printed sign near the entrance of the exhibition space inviting viewers to gently touch the works and interact with their surfaces directly. Through this interaction, the audience could engage not only visually but also physically with the material conditions that reflect the making process. Touch becomes a primary way of understanding the work, allowing the viewer to connect their own sensory experience to the processes of transformation embedded within the material.

Figure 11. Installation view of *In the Space Between*, Ignite Gallery, 2026.

Within this exhibition, there is a range of tactile conditions that correspond to different stages within the cycle of pain and healing. Some pieces are densely felted and tightly compacted, resulting in firmer and more resistant surfaces (Figure 12). These areas require more force during making and retain a sense of pressure and compression. Other areas remain at a pre-felt stage, with softer and more flexible textures that respond differently to touch (Figure 13). The contrast between these surfaces creates a spectrum of tactile experiences, allowing the viewer to move between sensations of tension and release. These variations are not only material differences but also reflect shifts in emotional states. When viewers press their hands against a densely felted surface and feel its resistance, the firmness communicates a sense of something held tightly together, suggesting moments of control, containment, or accumulated pressure. When they touch a softer, pre-felt area and feel it give way under their fingers, the material communicates a different condition, suggesting states of release, adjustment, or temporary relief. Rather than presenting a linear progression from pain to healing, the works collectively suggest that these conditions exist at the same time and continuously interact with one another. The exhibition therefore, does not resolve the cycle but holds it in a state of ongoing transformation.

Figure 12. Detail of *Skin*, showing a densely felted and compacted surface texture.

Figure 13. Detail of *Vessel*, showing a more loosely felted and softer texture.

Through this arrangement, the exhibition creates an environment where viewers can move through different tactile and spatial conditions that mirror the dynamics of the making process. The works function as material traces of repeated action, where each surface carries the evidence of pressure, friction, and time. By engaging with these surfaces through touch, the viewer is invited to experience the

cycle not as a concept but as a physical and sensory condition that unfolds across the entire body of work.

The titles of the works in this exhibition follow a deliberate naming logic that began with *Bruises* (Figure 14). Since the piece directly addresses bruising as a visible form of the pain-healing paradox, I felt the name should be equally direct. *Bruises* was short and clear enough to carry the weight of the concept without over-explaining it. Once that title was set, I continued the same format for the remaining works, naming them *Vessel*, *Skin*, and *Spine*. Each title refers to a part of the body, keeping the language simple and grounded in physical experience.

Figure 14. *Bruises*, wool on natural silk organza, 2026.

These titles were chosen not only for their conceptual meaning but also because they correspond to parts of my body that were injured during the making process. Throughout the making process, my body accumulated different kinds of injuries. I occasionally pricked my fingers with the felting needle, drawing blood and

puncturing the small vessels in my fingertips. The stress and anxiety of the project intensified my skin-picking habit, causing more damage to the skin on my thumbs. I also spent long periods hunched over during wet felting, which led to a persistent sharp, needle-like pain in my lower back and stiffness in my neck and cervical spine. When it came to naming the works, I realized that each title could correspond to one of these injuries. *Vessel* refers to the blood vessels in my fingertips, *Skin* to the damaged skin on my thumbs, and *Spine* to both my lower back and cervical spine, as they are connected along the same spinal region.

What I did not expect was that *Bruises* would develop their own physical echo as well. As I tried to reduce the strain on my lower back, I began adjusting my posture by working in a half-squat position, keeping my upper body upright while bending my legs. This made it harder to move around freely, and I frequently bumped my legs, especially my knees, against the edge of the table, leaving bruises. Later, during the exhibition installation, I had to climb a ladder to hang the work. Because I am afraid of heights, I leaned heavily forward to keep my balance, pressing my shins hard against the rungs of the ladder. This left large bruises along the front of both legs.

I came to value these coincidences deeply. They were not planned, but they created a layer of meaning that I could not have built intentionally. The injuries that occurred during making became a kind of physical evidence that connected my body to the work in a very literal way. Each piece was not only about pain and healing as a concept but had moved through my body as a lived experience during its creation. This also strengthened the relationship between the works themselves. Rather than being separate explorations of different ideas, the four pieces became linked through a shared physical reality, where the act of making one work left marks on the same body that was making the others. The titles, which I originally chose for their conceptual clarity, ended up functioning as records of this process. They name parts of the body that were both the subject of the work and the site of real, accumulated injury. In this way, the naming became another layer where the boundary between

the work and my own bodily experience dissolved, reinforcing the central argument of this project: that pain and making are not separate activities but part of the same continuous cycle.

Bruises

This work explores bruising as both a physical trace of pain and an emotional metaphor for what remains unseen beneath the surface. A bruise is a contradiction. It is simultaneously an injury and a sign of healing, a mark that appears after harm but also signals the body's ongoing process of repair. Rather than treating the bruise as a fixed image, I approach it as a layered condition that unfolds over time, depth, and shifting perspectives.

In medical terms, bruises change colour throughout the healing process, often transitioning from red to bluish and purple tones, and eventually to yellow as the body repairs itself (Bruise Healing). This gradual transformation informed my approach to colour and layering. A bruise is not a single state but a sequence of changes that emerge and fade over time.

In the making process, I initially experimented with using yellow and blue wool through needle felting to simulate the full colour range of a bruise (Figure 15). But I found that the available wool colours could not accurately match these tones, and the blending of wool fibres could not produce a sufficiently subtle transition. Compared to red and purple, which are more immediately recognizable as bruising, yellow and blue appeared too visually separate and disrupted the cohesion of the work. As a result, I chose to focus on a more controlled palette of deep red and purple tones (Figure 16).

Figure 15. Colour and material tests for *Bruises*, wool fibre on cheesecloth.

Figure 16. Deep red and purple wool roving used for *Bruises*.

The work is constructed using wool fibre felted onto sheer silk organza (Figure 17). To build each layer, I laid out the wool onto pre-cut pieces of organza according to its corresponding colour, then soaked the surface with soapy water and rubbed one side until the fibres began to bond with the fabric. Once that side was sufficiently felted, I flipped the piece over and repeated the same process on the back. I continued agitating both sides to ensure the wool was firmly attached and the surface was smooth and even (Figure 18). Because this piece remained relatively light even when fully wet, I added extra rounds of throwing and slapping the felt against a hard surface to achieve a tighter bond. I applied both wet felting and needle felting techniques on the front and back of the fabric so that the piece could be viewed from all angles, since the work will be displayed in the center and the back is as important as the front.

Figure 17. Colour and material test for Bruises, wool fibre on sheer silk organza.

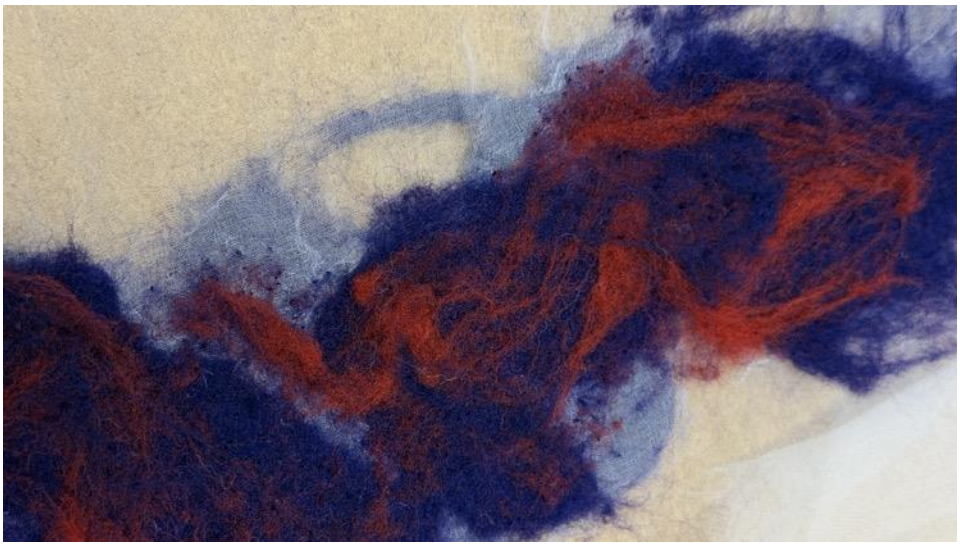

Figure 18. Detail of *Bruises*, showing wool fibre visible on both sides of the sheer silk organza.

During this process, I carefully controlled the placement and scale of each layer. From the front, the layers form irregular shapes that gradually increase in size. This arrangement allows the overlapping layers to visually merge into a complete form without exposing the underlying organza, even when accounting for differences in viewing distance (Figure 19). Each layer also contains a different distribution of red and purple fibres. The first layer is composed primarily of red with small amounts of purple. The second presents a more balanced distribution of both colours. The third shifts toward a dominance of purple with less red. These variations create a sense of depth and progression, echoing the temporal stages of bruising. While the structure of the work remains abstract, the use of colour helps anchor the piece in a recognizable bodily reference. This balance allows the work to remain open to interpretation without becoming too detached from its conceptual origin.

Figure 19. *Bruises* viewed at eye level, showing how the overlapping wool layers visually merge into a complete form through the translucent organza.

The transparency of the organza plays a central role in the final experience of the work. Each suspended layer holds fragments of colour, and when viewed from the front, these layers overlap into a cohesive bruise-like image (Figure 19). From the side, however, the work reveals itself as a series of separate strata (Figure 20). This shift in perspective exposes the internal structure of the piece, like how a medical scan reveals layers beneath the skin. The work therefore resists a single, fixed viewpoint and instead requires movement and time to be fully perceived.

Figure 20. *Bruises* viewed from the side, revealing the separate layers of wool fibre on organza.

By suspending the work in space, I invite the viewer to move around it, to look through it, and to encounter both its front and back (Figure 20). The front represents what is visible and external, the bruise as something acknowledged or exposed. The back suggests what remains internal and unspoken, pointing toward emotional experiences that are not always outwardly expressed (Figure 21). This dual visibility creates a sense of openness, where the work does not conceal its vulnerability but instead presents it as part of its structure. Ultimately, this piece is not only an imitation of bruising but a reflection on how pain exists within the body as memory, residue, and transformation. Through layering, translucency, and spatial openness, the work presents pain as something that is both deeply personal and quietly shared. It remains suspended between harm and healing, never fully resolved, but continuously in the process of change.

Figure 21. Back view of *Bruises*, showing the wool fibre visible through the sheer organza.

Vessel

Vessel (Figure 22) is a wet-felted work that draws on the visual language of blood vessels to explore pain and healing from a microscopic perspective. The title refers both to the blood vessel as a bodily structure and to the idea of a container

that holds something within it. Blood vessels are among the most vulnerable parts of the body. They are often the first thing damaged when injury occurs, and it is through them that we recognize we have been hurt. The visibility of blood, and how much of it appears, tells us how serious the damage is. In this sense, blood vessels function as a kind of internal signal, making invisible harm visible on the surface.

Figure 22. *Vessel*, wet felted wool, 2026.

The work takes the form of a portrait-oriented rectangular felt piece, where internal coloured layers are revealed through cuts made along the surface. These exposed lines of pastel-coloured wool run vertically through the work, resembling veins or vessels beneath the skin (Figure 22). The outer layer is composed of neutral-toned wool that was blended using a drum carder based on earlier colour tests. This muted surface acts like a skin, holding and concealing the colour underneath until it is opened.

In the making process, I laid out pastel-coloured wool in four loosely formed oval shapes of different sizes, distributing the colours unevenly to create variation. After wetting the wool with warm soapy water, I rolled these shapes into four uneven

tubes along their edges from left to right, then wrapped a thin layer of the blended outer wool around them before wetting again. Because only the front of the work would be visible in the final presentation, I used plain light-skinned toned wool for the bottom layer. Even though this layer would not be seen, I wanted the colour to stay consistent with the meaning of the piece. After laying two layers of flesh-toned wool and wetting them, I placed the four tubes on top and covered them with two more layers of the blended neutral wool (Figure 23), laid vertically for visual consistency with the portrait orientation.

Figure 23. Sample of blended neutral-toned wool from the drum carder, matching the outer layer colour of *Vessel*.

The felting process involved repeated wetting and agitation with soapy water, gradually increasing the temperature with each round until the final stage used boiling water. This ensured tight felting, though the high heat also caused significant shrinkage. To compensate, I stretched the wool during the rinsing stage to reshape and set the final dimensions. Once the felt had dried completely, I cut along the lines where the internal tubes sat, opening the surface to reveal the colours beneath.

This act of cutting is central to the meaning of the work. The surface must be broken for what is inside to become visible. In the same way, pain often remains hidden beneath the surface of the body until something ruptures or opens. The cuts

in *Vessel* do not represent destruction but exposure. They allow the inner layers to emerge, suggesting that what the body holds internally can eventually find a way to the surface. The contrast between the neutral exterior and the soft colour underneath reflects how emotional experience is often concealed behind an outward appearance of composure (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Detail of *Vessel*, showing pastel-coloured wool revealed through slits in the neutral exterior.

The four tubes vary in thickness and spacing, which produces an uneven rhythm across the surface of the work. Some cuts reveal wider openings with more visible colour, while others remain narrow and subtle. This variation echoes how pain is experienced unevenly across the body and across time. Some wounds feel more present and immediate, while others are quieter and take longer to surface. The piece reflects the reality that pain and healing do not follow a clean or symmetrical pattern through this inconsistency rather than a regularized form.

By working at the scale of the body's internal systems rather than its outer form, *Vessel* shifts the perspective from the visible to the structural. It asks the viewer to consider pain not as something that happens on the surface but as something carried within, circulating through the body the way blood moves through

vessels. Blood vessels are constantly active, transporting what the body needs to survive and to repair itself. In this sense, they represent not only vulnerability but also the body's capacity for care and regeneration. The work suggests that healing operates at this same level. It is not always visible, and it does not always leave a clear mark, but it is constantly taking place beneath the surface. The felt holds this idea physically. Its layers contain colour and texture that cannot be fully seen from the outside, and it is only through the act of opening that these internal conditions are revealed. *Vessel* presents this revealing not as a loss of protection but as a form of honesty, where allowing what is inside to be seen becomes part of the healing process itself.

Skin

Among all the works in the exhibition, *Skin* (Figure 25) demanded the greatest investment of time and attention. Its multi-step process unfolded across several days, with the total making time well over twelve hours, though I did not track it precisely.

Figure 25. *Skin*, wet felted wool, 2026.

The first step was creating the plastic template that would be used to separate the wool layers. I drew many irregular, rounded shapes onto a sheet of plastic and cut them out to create a stencil with open holes (Figure 26). The shapes were distributed unevenly, with smaller ones clustered closely together and larger ones spaced more loosely apart. I felt that if the shapes were too evenly distributed, the surface would lose a sense of life. This unevenness also continues the organic quality that runs through all my work. As I developed the layout, I wanted the shapes to have an accumulated effect. When I pick at the skin around my thumbs, I pull away many small pieces. While making *Skin*, I had this abstract image in my mind of all those pieces of skin piled up together like a small mound. I carried that image into the design of the template, letting the shapes build up in density in certain areas.

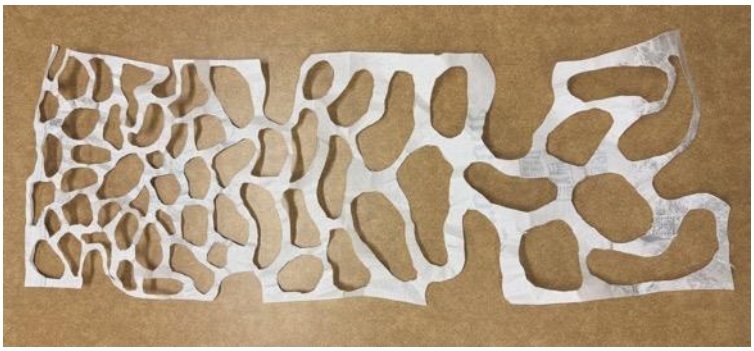

Figure 26. Plastic template for *Skin*, with irregular cut-out shapes used to separate wool layers during the wet felting process.

After finishing the template, I moved on to blending the wool. The inner layer used pastel-coloured wool (Figure 27), and the outer layer used neutral tones, following the same approach as the other works. I kept some of the colours consistent with the other pieces while introducing a few new tones to make sure *Skin* felt cohesive with the rest of the exhibition without being identical. To begin felting, I laid down two layers of blended pastel wool as the base, soaked them with soapy water, placed the plastic template on top, and then covered it with the outer layer of neutral-colour wool. From there, the wet felting process followed the same steps as my other works. But because this piece had so many fine details, the smaller holes in the template were prone to shifting or receiving uneven pressure during agitation,

which meant the wool in those areas sometimes failed to felt properly. This required significantly more time spent rubbing and shaping to make sure everything held together.

Figure 27. Sample of blended pastel-coloured wool from the drum carder, matching the inner layer colour of *Skin*.

Once the felt had dried, I could not simply refer to my earlier photos to locate where the template sat underneath, because the wool had shrunk and the plastic may have shifted during the process. Instead, I had to feel through the surface with my hands, reading the difference in texture to guess where the plastic was hidden beneath the wool. The first cut had to be precise, because there was no room for error. Once I made a small opening and could see the plastic layer between the wool, I was able to follow the edge of the template carefully, checking against my reference photos while gradually cutting away the outer wool. After the initial cuts were done, I removed the plastic pieces and began trimming the edges of each irregular shape until they were smooth and rounded. Finally, I felted these exposed edges again with warm soapy water to eliminate any visible trace of cutting and to make sure the whole surface was tightly bonded.

Conceptually, *Skin* is the work that connects most directly to the origin of this project. It was the first piece I began making, and its name points straight to the skin-picking habit that initially inspired my research. The surface of the finished work directly simulates the texture of picked skin, where some areas have been pulled away and others remain intact. The irregular openings in the outer layer reveal the softer, more colourful wool underneath, mirroring how skin-picking exposes what lies beneath the surface of the body. This pattern of partial removal and partial preservation reflects the uneven and unpredictable nature of the habit itself. It is never uniform or controlled. Some areas are picked more aggressively, while others are left untouched or only slightly disturbed.

But *Skin* also extends beyond a literal representation of the habit. The act of cutting into the felted surface to reveal what is hidden inside echoes a broader theme that runs through all the works in this exhibition: that what is carried internally does not always remain concealed. Over time, through pressure, repetition, or rupture, inner conditions find their way to the surface. In *Skin*, this happens through the deliberate removal of the outer layer. What is exposed is not rawness or damage alone, but colour, softness, and texture that have been present all along, held beneath a neutral exterior. In this way, the work suggests that vulnerability, once revealed, is not simply a wound. It can also be a site of unexpected richness, where what has been hidden carries its own quiet visual and tactile presence. The process of making *Skin* also mirrors this idea. The careful, time-consuming labour of feeling through the surface, making precise cuts, and slowly uncovering what is underneath parallels the slow and uncertain process of confronting pain rather than concealing it. The work does not present this confrontation as a resolution. The edges remain slightly irregular, the openings are unevenly distributed, and the surface still carries the tension between what is covered and what is exposed. Like the cycle of pain and healing that this project explores, *Skin* holds both conditions at once, without settling into either.

Spine

Spine (Figure 28) differs from the other works in its colour palette. To maintain cohesion across the exhibition, I used skin-toned wool, light pink wool, and a small amount of deep red for the inner blended layer (Figure 29). Across all the works, the only colours that do not appear outside of *Bruises* are its deep red and deep purple. My other pieces include light purple, but red is absent from them. By combining skin tones, light pink, and a touch of deep red in *Spine*'s inner layer, I was able to produce a colour that closely resembles actual human skin. Because this base layer so directly evokes the body, I wanted it to become the focal point of the piece. For the outer layer, I chose pure black wool, partly to create strong contrast and partly to contain the skin tones underneath, keeping them from feeling too exposed.

Figure 28. *Spine*, wet felted wool, 2026.

Figure 29. Sample of blended light skin tone, pink, and deep red wool from the drum carder, matching the inner layer colour of *Spine*.

After laying out the blended inner wool and wetting it, I placed a pointed oval-shaped plastic sheet on top (Figure 30). Over this, I added a layer of wool made from grey, black, and white fibres (Figure 31), so that when the work was eventually cut open, the revealed side would show a different colour and add another layer of visual depth. Finally, I covered everything with a layer of pure black wool. After repeated agitation and drying, I cut along the areas where the plastic sheet had prevented the layers from felting together. In the center of the work, I removed sections of the outer wool to expose the skin-toned base layer in a pattern that resembles the ridges of a spine. Along the top and bottom, I made horizontal cuts and folded back the resulting strips to reveal the grey-toned blended wool underneath. I originally planned to do this only at the top, because the horizontal openings reminded me of the arrangement of human ribs sitting above the spine. But for visual balance, I repeated the same approach at the bottom.

Figure 30. Pointed oval-shaped plastic template for *Spine*, used to separate the inner and outer wool layers during the wet felting process.

Figure 31. Detail of *Spine*, showing the neutral colour wool layer visible when the black outer surface is pulled open.

After the piece had fully dried, I noticed many fine, plastic-like fibres appearing on the surface of the black wool (Figure 32). These seemed to be impurities within the wool itself. Even though I had sourced the best Queensland wool I could find,

some contamination remained. Other colours likely contained similar fibres, but against the black they were far more visible. These fibres only became apparent after wet felting, not during needle felting. To reduce their visual distraction, I needle felted a thin layer of matching black wool over the surface. During this process, I noticed that the needle left very visible puncture marks on the back of the piece. This immediately reminded me of the moments when I accidentally pricked myself with the felting needle during making. Rather than trying to minimize these marks, I decided to make them more prominent and to treat the back of the work as part of its display. When viewers walk around to the other side, they encounter thousands of needle holes across the surface.

Figure 32. Surface of *Spine* after drying, showing fine plastic-like fibres visible on the black wool.

Of all the works in the exhibition, *Spine* is the most direct in its use of colour to reference the body. The skin tones of the inner layer are not abstract or suggestive. They are close to the actual colour of flesh, which gives the work an immediate physical presence that the other pieces approach more indirectly. What remains abstract is the form. The cut shapes and the central spine-like pattern do not replicate anatomy precisely, but they carry enough bodily reference to anchor the viewer's recognition.

The relationship between the front and back of this piece is central to its

meaning. The front presents a controlled surface. The black wool is dense, opaque, and concealing. It covers the skin-toned layer underneath the way clothing or composure might cover the body's vulnerability. The cuts and openings in the front are deliberate and considered. They reveal what is inside on my terms, in the pattern and rhythm that I chose. The back, however, tells a different story (Figure 33). The thousands of needle marks were not part of the original plan. They emerged as a byproduct of the repair process, and they carry a rawness that the front does not have. Each puncture is a small record of force applied to the surface, and together they accumulate into a texture that feels less controlled and more exposed.

Figure 33. Back of *Spine*, showing thousands of needle puncture marks from the repair process across the pink inner wool surface.

This contrast between front and back reflects something about how pain is experienced and expressed. What we show to others is often managed and composed, even when it references real vulnerability. But what accumulates on the other side, the side we do not always intend for people to see, often carries a more honest record of what the body and the process have been through. In *Spine*, the

needle marks function this way. They are traces of labour, repetition, and occasional injury that were never meant to be the focus, but which ended up holding their own kind of meaning.

Spine is also the only work in the exhibition that relies heavily on needle felting. While the other pieces are primarily shaped through wet felting, where transformation happens through water, heat, and sustained pressure, *Spine* introduces a different kind of physical action. Needle felting is sharp, precise, and repetitive. Each stab of the needle pushes fibres into place one puncture at a time (Figure 34). There is an inherent tension in this technique. The needle must cause small-scale damage to the surface in order to bind the material together. The fibres cannot bond without being pierced. This mirrors the broader theme of the project, where pain is not opposed to healing but is part of the same mechanism. In needle felting, every mark of damage is also a mark of construction. The surface cannot become whole without first being broken into, again and again. The back of *Spine* makes this process visible. It shows that the labour of building something stable and cohesive requires thousands of small acts of piercing, and that these acts do not disappear. They remain embedded in the material as a permanent record of how the work came to be.

Figure 34. Detail of the back of *Spine*

30mins &45mins Wet Felted Duration Piece

For this pair of works, I made two small pieces that are nearly identical in colour and size (Figure 35). Both use wool colours drawn from the other works in the exhibition, and both follow the same technique as *Skin*, using a plastic sheet as a barrier to prevent certain areas from felting together, creating the same cut-open, hollow effect at a smaller scale.

Figure 35. *30mins & 45mins Wet Felted Duration Piece*, wet felted wool, 2026.

The purpose of these two pieces is to show, as directly as possible, how different durations of wet felting produce entirely different textures and qualities. One piece was agitated and worked for roughly thirty minutes, the other for roughly forty-five minutes. These times only account for the active rubbing, rolling, and throwing. They do not include the time spent laying out wool, positioning the plastic sheet, or drying.

The difference between the two is immediately apparent through touch. The thirty-minute piece feels loose and barely held together. The wool fibres have only just begun to bond, and the irregular shaped cutout sections feel fragile, as though

they might come apart with slight pressure. The forty-five-minute piece, by contrast, is noticeably firmer and more compact. Because I gradually increased the water temperature with each round of agitation, the longer duration meant the wool experienced more heat and sustained pressure. This produced more visible wrinkling and greater shrinkage. The extra time also brought out more of the plastic-like fibres hidden within the black wool, the same impurities that appeared in *Spine*, made more visible here by the prolonged wet felting process.

I want viewers to touch both pieces and feel this difference for themselves. The contrast between the two makes tangible something that is usually invisible: the role of time and sustained effort in material transformation. Fifteen minutes of additional labour completely changes how the wool feels, how it holds together, and how it responds to the hand. The shift from loose and fragile to firm and stable parallels the movement from pain toward healing. It is not a sudden change but a gradual one, built through repetition and sustained pressure. By experiencing this contrast through touch, viewers develop a physical understanding of what different degrees of felting feel like. This understanding carries over into the rest of the exhibition. When viewers touch the other works and encounter varying densities, textures, and levels of firmness across their surfaces, they can begin to read those differences as evidence of process rather than simply as visual or textual qualities. The softness in one area and the tightness in another are no longer just surface details. They become traces of time, effort, and transformation that the viewer can now recognize through their own hands.

Video Projection

The exhibition also includes a five-minute video presented as a looping projection (Figure 36). This video documents my wet felting process, drawn from footage I have been recording since my earliest material experiments. Over the course of the project, I accumulated dozens of hours of video. To keep the final piece concise, I selected specific clips and edited them together. The screen is divided into

four sections, each playing different clips simultaneously. These clips were chosen for the clarity of their sound, the specificity of their camera angles, and their ability to convey the physical reality of wet felting when the volume is raised. The footage covers every stage of the process, from laying out wool to soaking it with soapy water to the extended periods of rubbing, rolling, and throwing that make up the majority of the work. One of the four sections shows the process from a first-person perspective, allowing viewers to see the work through my own eyes and feel closer to the physical experience of making.

Figure 36. Process video projection showing four simultaneous clips of the wet felting process, with *Bruises* visible in the foreground.

The projection serves a different function from the felted works in the exhibition. While the sculptures present the outcomes of transformation, the video shows what that transformation actually looks and sounds like in real time. Wet felting is a slow and physically demanding process. It requires sustained effort over long periods, and much of that effort is repetitive and exhausting. By playing the footage on a loop, the video emphasizes that this labour does not have a clear beginning or end. The viewer can enter and leave at any point, but the process continues. This reflects the same idea of ongoing, unresolved cycles that runs through the rest of the exhibition.

What the video also captures, unintentionally, is the toll of the process on my body. In some clips, my movements slow down. In others, there are quiet sighs between actions, or brief pauses where I adjust my posture before continuing. These are small details, but they are honest ones. Wet felting requires constant bending, leaning, and repetitive arm movement, and over time this led to the lower back pain that became part of my daily experience during the project. The video does not dramatize this. It simply records it as part of the process. The fatigue, the heaviness in my breathing, the moments where my body needs to pause before it can continue, these are all present in the footage because they were present in the making (Figure 37).

Figure 37. Screenshot of the process video, showing four simultaneous views of different stages of the wet felting process.

This is significant because the relationship between pain and making is not only conceptual. It is happening in real time, visibly and audibly. The viewer can hear the effort in the sound of wet wool being worked against a surface and see the repetition that produces the density and texture in the finished works. Within that repetition, they can also sense the physical cost. The projection makes visible what

the sculptures hold silently, revealing that the surfaces viewers touch were produced through real exertion, discomfort, and endurance. The video closes a gap between the finished object and the labour behind it, allowing the audience to understand the works not only as material forms but as evidence of a body working through pain over time.

Exhibition

My exhibition was installed on the West Side of the Ignite Gallery (Figure 38 & 39), which is a relatively open, rectangular space. The first decision I made was where to place the projection. It was positioned on the right-hand wall. I originally did not plan it to fill the entire wall, but a smaller projector produced an image that was too small, so I switched to a larger one. I increased the brightness because the space also uses spotlights to light the other works, and the projection needed to remain clearly visible under those conditions. I also raised the volume so that viewers could hear the amplified wet felting sounds in the video, but kept it at a level that would not feel overwhelming or disruptive to the viewing experience. On the night of the opening reception, I turned the volume up slightly more because the noise from the crowd made it harder to hear.

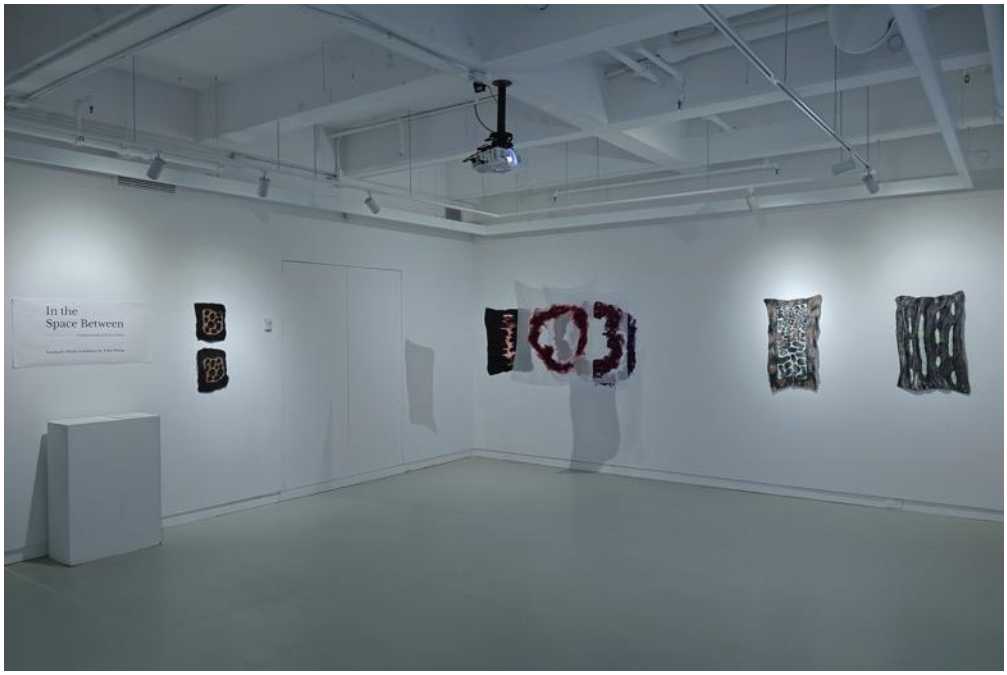

Figure 38. Installation view of *In the Space Between*, Ignite Gallery, 2026

Figure 39. Installation view of *In the Space Between*, Ignite Gallery, 2026

The most challenging installation was *Bruises*. It is a central work in the exhibition, and because I wanted viewers to be able to walk around it, I planned to hang it in a fairly central position (Figure 40), slightly to the left of the space. I wanted the three layers of organza and wool to be suspended at the same horizontal level at eye height, so that they would be the first thing viewers see when entering the exhibition. I used a thread called Cordon Transparent Monofilament, threading it through the top edge of each piece with a needle. Three threads were used to secure each layer. Because the thread is only 0.3mm in diameter and completely transparent, it is nearly invisible to the eye. I taped the threads to the ceiling to hold them in place. The ceiling in the Ignite Gallery is very high, and I could only just reach it from the top step of a ladder. There were no suitable hooks or nails already in place above, so I had to use tape and secure it as firmly as possible. The three suspended layers are spaced roughly 30cm apart, leaving enough room for viewers to lean their heads between any two layers and look through the work from within.

Figure 40. Installation view of *In the Space Between*, Ignite Gallery, 2026.

Spine also needed to be hung. I used the same transparent thread, passing it through the top edge on both sides of the piece with a needle, again ensuring that it hung at eye level (Figure 41). Because the angle was difficult and there were many light tracks and spotlights above, I ran a taut horizontal line across the ceiling and secured it in place. I then tied the two threads from the piece to this line at separate points, so that gravity would pull the felt straight down from the center without swaying side to side. I positioned *Spine* as far from the corner as possible so that there would be enough space behind it for viewers to discover the back of the work. The reason it ended up in the corner area at all is that the left side of my exhibition space has two doors, one office door just to the left of the entrance and a set of double doors further back. Although both doors remain closed during exhibitions, they are visually disruptive. Hanging work directly over them would only draw more attention to their presence, so I left those areas empty and installed the works elsewhere.

Figure 41. *Spine* installed in the gallery corner, casting shadows on both adjacent walls.

The remaining works did not need their backs to be visible. *Skin* and *Vessel* followed the same installation process (Figure 42). I used a tape measure to mark 56 inches from the floor, which is the standard optimal hanging height, and aligned the center of each work to that point. I used a level to make sure they were not tilted, then temporarily held them in place with masking tape before securing the four corners with T-pins. I did not push the pins all the way in. By leaving a small gap, the works sit slightly away from the wall, which gives them a more dimensional appearance. I then rotated all the T-pins to a horizontal position so they looked more uniform. These two works are installed on the right side of the space, at some distance from *Bruises*. They are also spaced apart from each other, close enough to be read as part of the same series because of their similar format and placement, but far enough to be understood as individual works.

Figure 42. *Skin* (left) and *Vessel* (right) installed side by side on the gallery wall.

On the left side near the entrance, in the open area to the right of the doors, I pinned the two wet felt time duration pieces (Figure 43). They are arranged vertically so that viewers can touch them from top to bottom and feel the wool becoming progressively tighter and more dense, sensing the accumulation of time and effort. To the left of these two pieces, I placed a plinth holding a printed map handout of the West Side layout, which shows the location and title of each work (Figure 43). This allows viewers to understand the general theme of the exhibition through the titles alone, and in particular to grasp the significance of the duration pieces. Next to the map, I placed my artist statement so that viewers could read it and fully understand the concept behind the exhibition. Above the plinth, I displayed the exhibition title, subtitle, and my name (Figure 43). Because the Ignite Gallery does not encourage the use of vinyl lettering, I printed these and attached them to the wall. Finally, I printed a sign inviting viewers to touch the works and placed it on the far left.

Figure 43. Exhibition entrance with title wall, artist statement and gallery map handout for Ignite Gallery West Side on the plinth, and *30mins & 45mins Wet Felted Duration Piece* on the right.

All the lighting in my space was done with spotlights. For *Bruises* (Figure 44), I kept the lighting as dim as possible to preserve its translucent, see-through quality. A single spotlight was positioned to the far right of the piece, casting its shadow to the left. This provided enough soft illumination without projecting a shadow onto the projection wall. *Spine* (Figure 45) has a spotlight positioned to its upper left. Combined with the spotlight used for *Bruises*, the two lights illuminate *Spine* from both sides, while also casting two shadows behind it to the left and right. These shadows happened to fill the corner area that had originally looked too empty. The rest of the works and the exhibition title area each have a spotlight positioned directly in front of them (Figure 46). Overall, the lighting across my space is kept intentionally low to accommodate both the projection and the translucency of *Bruises*.

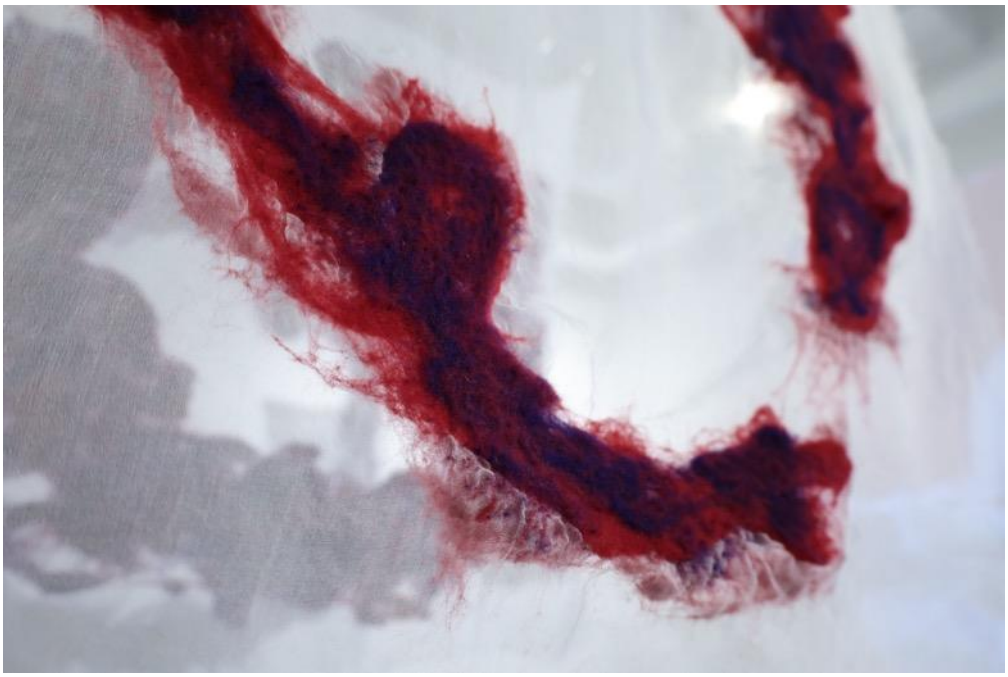

Figure 44. Detail of *Bruises* under dim spotlight lighting, showing the translucency of the organza

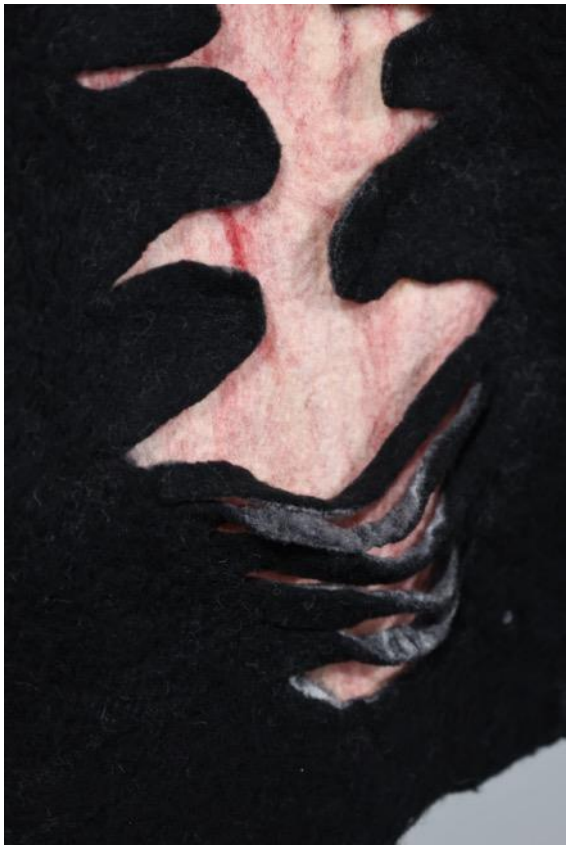

Figure 45. Detail of *Spine* under dual spotlight lighting from both sides.

Figure 46. Detail of *30mins & 45mins Wet Felted Duration Piece* under direct spotlight lighting.

Reflection

Significance

I originally chose felting as my medium because of its similarity to my skin-picking habit. Both involve repetitive physical actions where disruption is necessary to produce stability. During the making process, I experienced this parallel in my own body. The long hours of wet felting left me physically exhausted. My lower back, my fingers, and my knees were all injured at various points. The repetitive motions of rubbing, rolling, and throwing the wool became mechanical over time. My mind would go blank and my body would take over, moving through the actions without conscious thought. But then, after finishing a piece, I would suddenly become aware again and realize that all of that effort had been transformed into something I could look at and recognize as a finished form. This shift, from mindless labour to sudden recognition, is another way of experiencing the movement from pain to healing. The sense of accomplishment I felt after completing a work made the physical discomfort and fatigue feel secondary. My body had not yet recovered, but something in my mind had already moved past the difficulty. In that moment, the healing was not physical. It was psychological. And that is exactly what this project set out to explore.

Throughout the preparation and making of this exhibition, many things happened that could be described as coincidences. The injuries I sustained during making corresponded to the titles of the works. The feedback I received from viewers aligned with the themes of the project in ways I had not anticipated. These connections came from many different angles, but they all pointed in the same direction, reinforcing that the territory I was exploring, injury, healing, renewal, and the resilience of living things, was the right one. These coincidences did not just confirm my direction. They gave me more confidence to go deeper into the subject.

Challenges

The most significant challenge during the making process was the

combination of limited time and the unpredictability of wet felting. I finalized what I wanted the works to look like relatively late in the process, and my application to use the textile studio was approved in February, which was when I could begin using the drum carder to blend wool colours and achieve the visual quality I wanted. Wet felting is a technique I taught myself, and in the early stages I failed many times. There are numerous variables that affect the outcome: the amount of soap, the water temperature, the amount of water, the thickness of the wool layers, the pressure and technique of rubbing, and the duration of agitation. All of these influence the final result, and when something went wrong it was often difficult to identify which factor was responsible. I could only make a guess and adjust one variable the next time to see if the result improved. Even after gaining enough experience to produce a work like Skin, I was still encountering failures in the days leading up to installation. The number of failed pieces was two to three times greater than the number of finished works in the exhibition.

Among all the works, Skin required the most time and precision. After the felt had dried, cutting it open to remove the plastic template was one of the most nerve-wracking steps in the entire project. I had to follow the edges of the template carefully, checking against reference photos, while making sure not to pull the gap too wide and cause the wool to separate. Bruises presented its own installation challenges. The ceiling in the Ignite Gallery is very high, and all three layers of organza needed to hang at the same horizontal level. The organza fabric is also prone to creasing and retains visible needle holes from the felting process. I took several additional steps to keep the surfaces as smooth and flat as possible.

Because some of the works are intentionally not tightly felted, they are more fragile than they might appear. While I invited viewers to touch the works, not all pieces could withstand forceful handling. The thirty-minute duration piece was deliberately left at a pre-felt stage to demonstrate the difference that time makes in the felting process. This meant it was particularly vulnerable, and by the end of the exhibition it had sustained some minor damage. I chose not to repair it with needle

felting because doing so would compromise its purpose as a record of a specific duration of wet felting. If the work is exhibited again in the future, I would make a new piece to replace it rather than alter the original.

Audience Feedback

All of the works in this exhibition are open to interpretation, and I intentionally stepped back during the opening to let viewers form their own readings before offering any explanation. I wanted the audience to have a moment of guessing and responding to the work on their own terms before I answered any questions. This approach led to many unexpected and meaningful conversations.

One viewer told me that Skin reminded them of cells. They saw the irregular shapes, moving from sparse to dense, as resembling cells dividing and multiplying. I found this reading very interesting because cell division is fundamentally an act of reproduction. When the body is injured, cells divide to replace old or damaged ones and promote wound healing (Dr. Biology). What the viewer described as a biological process is closely related to the healing theme at the core of my work, even though they arrived at this connection through a completely different entry point.

Another viewer told me that Vessel looked like a tree trunk. This comparison stayed with me because tree trunks endure rain, wind, and storms over time. Their bark cracks, peels, and falls away. This reminded me of my own skin-picking habit, where the surface is gradually worn and removed. At the same time, a tree is a living thing, constantly growing and repairing itself. This connection extended the idea of pain and healing beyond the human body and into a broader understanding of how living things endure damage and continue to grow.

When a friend first saw Bruises, they thought it looked like a portal. I found this idea compelling because portals in film and literature usually transport a person from one space to another. In the context of my exhibition, Bruises functions as a different kind of portal, one that marks a transition between states rather than locations. The layered structure of the piece, where each suspended layer holds a

different stage of colour and depth, shows the viewer the steps within this process. In a way, the entire exhibition could be understood as a portal, offering passage from the experience of pain toward the possibility of healing.

After learning that the work depicted bruising, one friend shared with me the bruises, scars, and calluses he had accumulated from rock climbing. He said he could relate deeply to my work because he voluntarily chose to climb even though it meant he would inevitably get hurt. When he finished a climb and looked at the marks on his body, he saw them not as damage but as proof of effort. The more calluses on his hands, the more hours he had put in, and the closer he was to becoming more skilled. His experience echoed the central paradox of my project: that pain, when entered into willingly and processed through sustained physical effort, can lead to growth, competence, and a sense of accomplishment rather than simply harm.

Future Plan

My original exhibition plan included works that I was not able to complete within the given timeframe, and I want to continue developing those pieces. In particular, I am interested in exploring more variations of the wet felting techniques used in Skin and Vessel, where plastic templates create internal separations that are later revealed through cutting. These techniques produced some of the most visually and conceptually rich results in the exhibition, and I believe there is more to discover within this approach, both in terms of form and in terms of what the process can communicate about concealment and exposure.

I am also interested in scaling the work differently. The pieces in this exhibition were all relatively modest in size, partly due to time constraints and partly because I was still learning the techniques. With more experience and time, I would like to experiment with larger formats that could surround or envelop the viewer, creating a more immersive tactile environment. I am curious about whether a larger scale would change the way viewers physically engage with the surfaces, and whether it might

intensify the sensory experience of moving between dense and soft areas.

Beyond felting, I would like to explore how other fibre-based or textile techniques might extend the themes of this project. Materials that respond to heat, moisture, or pressure in different ways could offer new ways of thinking about how the body's relationship to pain and healing can be materialized. I am also interested in how sound and video documentation, like the projection included in this exhibition, could play a larger role in future presentations, potentially becoming works in their own right rather than supplementary elements.

This project began from a very personal place, rooted in a habit I had carried since childhood. Through the process of making, exhibiting, and receiving feedback, it has grown into something that connects to much broader questions about how people relate to pain, effort, and recovery. I do not see this exhibition as the end of the investigation. It is a starting point, and the coincidences, conversations, and material discoveries that emerged along the way have shown me that there is much more to explore within this space between pain and healing.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how the tactile process of wool felting can demonstrate the transformation of pain into healing. The project began from a personal habit of skin-picking, a behaviour that exists between self-harm and self-soothing, and asked whether this paradox could be translated into material form through felting. The central research question, how the tactile process of wool felting can demonstrate the transformation of pain into healing as an intangible psychological repair, has been investigated through autobiographical reflection, scientific and sensory research, and sustained material experimentation.

Through the making process, I found that felting closely mirrors the psychological structure of skin-picking. Both involve repetitive physical actions where disruption and stabilization happen simultaneously. In needle felting, fibres cannot bond without being pierced. In wet felting, wool must be agitated and compressed over long periods before it becomes stable. These processes do not move neatly from damage to repair. Instead, the two conditions coexist within the same action. This understanding, supported by research on pain-offset relief (Franklin et al. 525) and the role of tactile engagement in emotional regulation (Liu), confirmed that pain can function as a catalyst for calm rather than simply as harm.

The body of work presented in this exhibition, *Vessel, Bruises, Skin, Spine*, the two time duration pieces, and the video projection, each addresses a different aspect of this cycle. *Vessel* explores pain and healing from a microscopic, internal perspective. *Bruises* presents the bruise as a layered condition that unfolds across time and depth. *Skin* connects most directly to the skin-picking habit that initiated the research, simulating the texture of partial removal and preservation. Spine introduces the contrast between a controlled exterior and the raw, unplanned accumulation of needle marks on its reverse. The duration pieces make the role of time and effort physically available through touch. The video projection closes the gap between the finished objects and the labour behind them, showing the physical cost of the process in real time. Together, these works do not present healing as a

resolved outcome. They hold it as an ongoing condition, where tension, pressure, and moments of release continue to interact.

Tactile engagement proved to be essential to the exhibition. By inviting viewers to touch the works, the project offered a way of understanding transformation that goes beyond visual observation. The contrast between loosely felted and tightly compacted surfaces, between soft openings and dense, resistant areas, allows the audience to feel the accumulation of time and effort directly through their hands. This sensory experience connects the viewer to the making process and to the emotional states embedded within the material. The responses I received during the exhibition confirmed that this approach resonated beyond my own experience. Viewers brought their own associations to the work, interpreting the forms through references to cell division, tree trunk, and portals. One visitor connected the project to his own experience of voluntary pain through rock climbing, recognizing the same paradox of willingly entering discomfort in pursuit of growth. These readings, though unexpected, aligned closely with the themes of the project and demonstrated that the works could communicate across different lived experiences.

An unexpected but significant outcome of the project was the way my own body became implicated in the work. The injuries that accumulated during making, pricked fingertips, worsened skin-picking, lower back pain, and bruised legs, were not planned, but they created a layer of meaning that could not have been built intentionally. The titles of the works, originally chosen for their conceptual clarity, came to function as records of these lived experiences. This overlap reinforced a central finding of the research: that pain and making are not separate activities but part of the same continuous cycle.

Through this project, I have come to understand felting not only as a craft technique but as a method of inquiry. The repetitive actions, the resistance of the material, and the gradual emergence of form all contribute to a way of thinking through the body that cannot be fully separated from making itself. This research

proposes that pain does not need to be erased or fully resolved in order to be processed. It can be held within material, reshaped through sustained effort, and made present through form, texture, and touch. Healing, as this project demonstrates, is not a destination. It is a condition that continues to unfold, carried in the space between harm and repair, between tension and release, between what is hidden beneath the surface and what eventually finds its way through.

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