



**Project
Space**



Xpace Cultural Centre
2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xpace.info

Zahra Komeylian

Container for a precarious record

April 12 - May 11, 2019

By Marina Fathalla in conversation with Zahra Komeylian

Installation: wax performance ephemera, text imprint, steel, found memory foam, found metal, rust, soil.

Container for a precarious record is a selection of fractured wax impressions resulting from a durational performance to cast postures of artist's arms. In this process, the artist repetitively submerges her arms into molten wax and water. At the point in which the limb enters the water vessel, the wax surrounding it congeals; and the posture of the limb is recorded through the formation of an arbitrary cast. In this tactile process, a fluid exchange occurs. The three materials impress upon the form of the other: water takes heat, wax congeals and body leaves its imprint. Each cast is an imprint of the arm's posture at instances of respite, rest and numbing. Wax was historically used as a material for record keeping. Tablets consisting of two blocks of wax framed in a wooden diptych were used as a writing surface. To reuse the tablet, the wax would be re-melted and the surface smoothed. Of salience here is the material's reusability. It contains the memory of previous inscriptions.

Painted a subtle grey, the project space is conceived as a 'container.' Within the container are iterations of the artist's temporal investigations with wax as a record of the docility of the body and the burden of social institutions on it. Komeylian situates a process-based methodology and materiality to re-think her negotiation with the institution of family. Inviting a meandering through the container, the room houses records of the limbs, as they lie, or rest on materials and on the floor. As a physical mode for record keeping, the readability of the limbs in wax is purposefully obscure, and details of the postural records are lost during the casting process. In its repetition, the resulting casts become subconscious, distracted, and implicit movements of the body.

One can see the vulnerability of the gendered body and its precarious dependence on social relationships in this work. Familial impositions, expectations and patriarchal structures are deeply rooted and transferred through generations. In the case of the diasporic body, there is a choice to separate from abiding by culturally sanctioned obligation. When social bonds disintegrate, or one disobeys, what happens to the body? What feels at stake in *Container for a precarious record* is, what existential tensions are present in the negotiation of agency? And an intangible fear of loss of self, or disappearing in navigating the parameters of this institution.

Wax casts lay under and atop memory foam, recalling the posturality of docile bodies¹. The docile body becomes malleable and willingly submissive as it succumbs to rest under the force of social institutions and their architectures of power, impressing upon and molding it. The laborious process of casting is an effort to record the body's movement and to reveal in these casts, evidence of the "training" that has been inscribed on the body over time. In this way, rules are learned, and the body is rendered a vessel where the set of social dictations or prescriptions are inscribed. The arms signify one's connection to the collective. The phrase, at arm's length recalls a certain distance

¹ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. p.135, 1995. In *Discipline and Punish*, the docile

and proximity of the arms to each other and signify an exchange of giving and receiving. The social body is perhaps an internalization of this shared space.

The memory foam is reminiscent of domesticity and one's negotiation with the institution of family. Komeylian identifies a paradoxical relationship to the foam, "the foam cloaks, protects, and cushions, but also suffocates in a slow and insidious manner." Laid under the body, memory foam is a place of rest and comfort. The bedding holds the body's fatigue, fragility and subsistence, and in its softness stunts pain. Conversely, the pain is causal of the institution of family as it conditions the body. When the body is in paralysis, and its free movement is prevented, bedsores occur at the surface of the skin. Underneath these institutional pressures, the body succumbs to a paralysis or slow movement. It also negotiates within its internal spaces: within the marrow, within the spine, it contemplates movement against that which is pressing onto it.

Wax tablets sit on hot-rolled metal shelving at the periphery of the room, comprised of remelted wax detritus from the performative act. As an excess of the material, these pieces call us to consider the embodied conditioning retained in the material memory of the wax over time. The prose stamped onto the wax surface leaves a light trace as a palimpsest, subject to rewriting. The palimpsest is a surface that has been defaced after writing, but traces of the previous marks are still visible on the surface. Making its presence only slightly known, the prose gives semblance of appearing and disappearing. The words are a meditation of simultaneously surfacing and repressed, semi-conscious internal murmurs that emerge from an undefined or subconscious space. They surface and float on the plane of the muted material of the wax slabs.

Elevated on a hard surface, the slabs placed at hip height demand proximity and a contortion of posture on the part of the viewer, in order to read the texts with some effort. The collapsed casts of the limbs lay on the ground at their most malleable, fragile and vulnerable state placed at the viewer's feet, and flattened underneath found metal objects. The hardness of the steel and the rusted metal are like deboned spines,

sometimes pressing against, trapping or enveloping the casts, sedentary and unable to move.

there is a wall of boxes where I keep my sleeping limbs
how do these containers relate to those containers?

they cling,
to the insides of the cardboard.

I can see all the spaces around me.
But I cannot see myself in the space

At once, my postures have become the object of
dripping
buoyancies.
of ocular pressures

Have you ever meditated on a sleeping foot?
When you do not perturb it.
When it hangs suspended,
undragged,
unmoved

You must wait.
For it acquiesces within itself.
equilibrates.

I stood,

in a place.

I have been dragging them for some time.

the boxes,

and the atrophied things.

waiting for the marrow to grow a spine

I suspect I will disappear

This project was made possible by generous support from the Ontario Arts Council and Chalmers Family Fund. The artist would like to thank Max Lester, Nima Esmailpour and Jo Yetter.