body — mind — distance
Cassidy Alejandria, Sabrina Vachon

Cassidy Alejandria: As an artist with a dance and movement background, how do you navigate more static media such as printmaking and sculpture?

Sabrina Vachon: When I first read this question, I loved it. No one's ever asked me a question like this before because I feel like my dance practice is sometimes so separate from everything else that I get to do. Even though I might not have started every visual project with movement or bodily inspiration, there's still something very interesting, at least for me, about repetitive movements and the process of creating. Even though some of my work is static, I think for *Mole Removal I* particularly remember when I was carving the wood plates to then stamp them on—that kind of repetitive movement of pushing and pulling at the wood was really interesting to me—and pressing down the prints onto the fabric was really interesting. Even though the work didn't end up being a performance, I almost felt like there was a certain kind of movement language being created through something static, like print.

SV: Even though a lot of the work isn't performance based, I try to be in tune with how my body feels and how my body wants to move and create and that comes from that improvisation part I was talking about, and how having a plan sometimes doesn't feel good in the body, in the gut, in the soul. So having these other ways to create and trying to improvise and work around it while it's happening is really important to me and integral to how I've made a lot of my work.

CA: On a related note, would you consider your body an integral part of your artworks? I'm particularly curious if you consider this in terms of your printmaking practice, as your body isn't visible in the way it would be during a performance.

SV: My body is definitely, definitely integral. We can do nothing in this world without our beautiful bodies to help us. I'm so grateful I'm able to move and express in a way that isn't just on paper, or, I guess, static, and I'm grateful I can move in these ways because those are often starting points, or sometimes they go nowhere. I try to move when I want to, because I think society tries to tell us how to move our bodies, how to look and how to be as human beings. Just practicing those little moments of "Hey, I want to kick my leg up in the air just to see if I can do it," or "I want to stretch as far as I can just to see if I can do it." I think that's so important and directly relates to "Hey, I want to draw this line as far as I can just to see if I can do it," and "I want to edit this video in this certain way just to see if I can." That part of exploring and using your sense of bodily autonomy is so important as an artist and as a human being too. I feel that very deeply.

CA: That kind of curiosity you describe reminds me so much of being a kid. Like the other day, my family and I were at my Lola's house, and my niece—she's in dance—kicked up her leg to see how far she could go. Then my cousins in the room—all at least 20 years old—wanted to see if they could do it.

SV: I think that's actually the best thing ever. Watching that happen would be the best thing in the world. Watching people move however they want to is so beautiful to me—because I also came from a very structured dance background where you didn't have as much freedom to move how you wanted—maybe you were reprimanded for looking or moving in a certain way. Coming back to it as a young adult and still dancing in that competitive and rigid way, but then trying to find where we can have our own power in that. I think that's really important, and I've been trying to find that more recently.

CA: Do you ever feel a distance between your body and your work? And if so, how have you navigated this distance?

SV: I often disassociate my body from what I'm working on at the moment. Since a lot of my work does involve the body in some way—and most of the time it's my own body—it's hard to see yourself, to look at the details of your face or watch hours of footage of yourself dancing. So in those instances there's a kind of disassociation, but I don't know if I would necessarily say that it is distance. I don't know if it's necessarily bad distance; I don't think that disassociation is necessarily all bad. I think there needs to be a sort of neutrality you feel about your body—as somebody who uses their body through movement and in my visual practice—there has to be a neutral zone, and I have to just be okay with it. I can't feel great or awful about it. When I'm working on a project, I have to let it be what it is. So there's a distance in that way, but I think that's almost needed. If I were right up close to it, or next to it, I'd be a little too much. I think you can get very critical really quickly. When it's work about your body, are you being critical of the work itself, or are you being critical of the content of the project?

CA: Growing up in a diasporic context, I often felt my perception of self was shaped by how others labelled and viewed me. Do you find your artistic practice helpful in maintaining your sense of self, and how have others' perceptions of you affected your work, if at all?

SV: I definitely feel like my artistic practice has of made me who I am in a way. When you go into university, those are the big years of change. In a program like my own, where we're constantly having to look at our own positionality and experiences, it forced me to look inwards. It forced me to express that outwardly, and I don't mean just through my artwork. I think my artwork is a great show of my sense of self, but I also mean through speaking and trying to explain my ideas, conversing with people about art. I think that has been important to me and has created a deeper sense of self, knowing how to work with people, what materials I like, how to be organized and how I like to form my practice—those are all more important to me than I feel the artwork is. Even though both are part of the artwork, I feel like that process showed me more about who I was than the final outcome.

SV: Who doesn't get affected by what other people think? I try to look at everything with an open mind. I'm not just making art for myself so that I can be satisfied. I know a lot of people do that, but I want to try to have different conversations and connections with people. When people watch and experience the art, I want it to be more than just something that serves me. So I'm always trying to be open about what people think, whether it's criticisms or whatever. I think that's also a very important part of my practice and it would be hard if it didn't affect me or my work. I try to look at it through a lens of learning rather than criticism or judgement, but it's hard. I always say these things, and maybe they're not true in practice, but you try.

CA: I think just having an awareness of it is something that is hard for most people. So it's nice that you're able to at least acknowledge that it has an impact.

SV: Yeah, I hope many people would say the same because I know it affects people. When we make art that's about us and our experiences, it's easy to get drilled into this hole of me, myself, and I—and that's the last thing I want to do.