

Glorious Scars

The Spectacle of Pain and the Willing to Witness

The experience of pain is seemingly a given within the terms and conditions of our humanness. From paper cuts to psychological duress, pain appears in our lives through a variety of forces and in differing intensities. Encounters with pain can be unexpected, accidental, or self-inflicted. We have experiences of pain that are perceived as personal (thus, private) and others that are communal (often, made public). And though these forms of pain are familiar sensations, the task of communicating our pain to others is complex, as it is deeply rooted in our own subjective perception of those sensations— physical or psychological.¹

In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed describes the experience of pain as something that occurs through the delineation of boundaries between bodies. Skin, Ahmed suggests, acts as the membrane of separation, one that we become most keenly aware of at the point of disruption from our perceived (or, rather, unperceived) state of neutrality.² For Ahmed, it is absolutely necessary that this disruption – or pain – not only be experienced by the subject but witnessed by another. In being seen, pain is authenticated.³ This notion, however, becomes complicated by the subtle differentiations between the roles of witness and spectator. At what point does a witness – who seems to hold a sense of duty and obligation – become a spectator – an onlooker – someone who is more removed, and vice versa?

Chilean-American multimedia artist Claudia Bitrán reifies pain as a form of engagement between subject and witness in her series of “stop-motion painting animations,” *Fallen*.⁴ Examining experiences of private pain that are then made public, Bitrán engages her audience in a complex subject-witness relationship which implicates the viewer as an unsuspecting witness to never-ending loops of pain. Through this, Bitrán raises questions about our relationship to the spectacle of pain in the post-Internet, screen-ruled world where Ahmed’s

¹ Sara Ahmed, "The Contingency of Pain.," In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 23-27.

² Sara Ahmed, "The Contingency of Pain," 25.

³ Sara Ahmed, "The Contingency of Pain," 31.

⁴ Bitrán, Claudia. "Frenzy (2020)." CLAUDIA BITRAN, 2020.
<https://claudiabitran.com/frenzy-2020.html>.

interpersonal and cultural analysis of pain becomes complicated by the fetishization of replayable pain and the existence of distant, atemporal witnesses.

Reminiscent of more family-friendly iterations of body trauma aired on the long-running show *America's Funniest Home Videos* or uploaded to YouTube in the form of the "Cinnamon Challenge," the original videos that Bitrán transforms in *Fallen* turn pain into a form of "media spectacle, in which the pain of others produces laughter and enjoyment, rather than sadness or anger."⁵ Uploaded with the intent of mass consumption and entertainment, these candid videos of young women on the brink of death due to their excessive alcohol consumption are sinister, if not total exploitation of their subjects. The videos are produced and consumed without care or compassion for their teenage protagonists and their compromised states. These images play into what Ahmed calls a "fetishization of the wound."⁶ The viewer watches the young women endure humiliation and can experience it over and over again with the click of a button. The subject lacks agency; the distribution of power between subject and witness is unbalanced, for she only exists in the formless, virtual landscape. An element of her humanity is shed in her disembodiment. In this way, the video becomes a scab, re-opened again and again as a form of macabre entertainment fueled by a stroking of the death drive.

This contextualization of pain as entertainment thrusts the original videos into a space between disaster porn and slapstick comedy. Inebriated, femme-presenting bodies slam beer cans into their heads, shotgun brews, ricochet off of walls, and vomit onto themselves, in a show of glorious and disastrous drunken, teenaged foolery. The multidimensionality of the subjects' experiences, however – charged by both ecstasy and danger, are reduced to mere content for pleasurable consumption. They are viewed and scrolled past, satisfying the viewer without consideration for the subject. How does the distance of screens provide room for the spectator to shirk responsibility as witness? This is not to say that the witness needs to provide empathy, as empathy cannot bridge the pain of the subject to the witness, though it can give off the dangerous illusion that it does.⁷ Ahmed herself may not be opposed to a witness that laughs out of a sense of awkwardness or discomfort; rather, the true conflict between subject and witness arrives in the form of a wound as fetish. The question that festers beneath these videos is that of the consumability of women's pain as both laughable and commodifiable. Bitrán makes

⁵ Sara Ahmed, "The Contingency of Pain," 32.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sara Ahmed, "The Contingency of Pain," 37.

us aware of this trend. She pulls from a collection of media that proves there is a desire to see this content and take pleasure in a distanced witnessing of disaster.

In *Fallen*, Bitrán refutes this form of thoughtless, desensitized witnessing. She collects and reconstructs these clips into masterful portraits of the spectacle of drunkenness that engage the viewer in a critical evaluation of both the videos themselves and their own relationship to them. Looping the videos without end, Bitrán mimics the manner in which the original content is consumed. She wields the desire to consume this content against her audience, drawing them in to her complex re-renderings of these intimate moments made public. Providing the spectator with their desires ad nauseam, the humor begins to dissipate and the content takes on a sense of despair. How many times can the viewer act as a witness before they've had enough? At what point do they remove themselves from viewing? Is it the self-consciousness of potentially being seen delighting in these scenes of abjection that causes a spectator to stop watching or is it an act of self-preservation? What causes the viewer to "move away" from the videos? It is in this moving away – this aversion of the gaze– that the viewer creates a sense of distance between themselves and the depicted experience of pain. This, Ahmed suggests, gives a psychological sense of returning to safety to the neutral, unperceived state of being in the body.⁸ How does the witness shirk responsibility as an act of self preservation, a desire to affirm and take comfort in their own safety, their absence of pain? And conversely, how does engaging with these videos act as a reminder of the abjectness of the body – its possibility of peril, refuse, and malfunction?

Harkening to Ahmed's notion of skin as a boundary, the clips that Bitrán chooses to reimagine showcase decisive moments of bodily collision. Heightening the viewer's awareness of the surfaces of the subjects' bodies as they slam into walls, stumble to their knees, and roll on the floor, Bitrán evokes an awareness of the viewer's own body's boundaries– its existence as a container susceptible to damage. In this way, Bitrán continues to conjure forces of identification, not as a means to elicit empathy, but as a way to resituate the viewer as a witness to pain that "authenticates its existence" rather than as a spectator of it.⁹ She places the body as the nexus of subject and witness, emphasizing images that at times may elicit a physical reaction – a tensing of the shoulders, curling of the toes, a wince.

⁸ Sara Ahmed, "The Contingency of Pain," 25.

⁹ Sara Ahmed, "The Contingency of Pain," 31.

Foregrounding the bizarre and unnatural movements of inebriated bodies, Bitrán disrupts fluidity of the videos' movements and therefore the viewer's experience by employing stylized stop-motion techniques. Through the use of inconsistent frame rates and sequencing, Bitrán slows the videos, and creates jagged, lagging effects in the animations. She permits the animations to hesitate before moments of impact and speed through sequences of stumbling, perhaps hinting at the subjects' impaired perception of space and time. This allows the viewer to not only see the subject, but also to glean a somatic sense of their experience of intoxication. While the overall effect creates an impediment in easy consumability for the viewer, it also forces them to enter into the experience in a more visceral manner, observing the body's relationship to space and time. The viewer is transported into the subject's temporality. The barrier of the screen begins to break down. By nature of the peculiar temporality of Bitrán's videos, the viewer becomes required not only to consider the subject's perspective, but to simply spend more time with the content – to bear witness to the subjects' actions which are focused on moments of collision and rupture. Present is this experience of dysfunction which the viewer gleans from the seemingly dysfunctional video which defies the viewer's expectations of time.

Ahmed refers to pain as, “experiences of dysfunction.” Dysfunction provides for a return to the body as it is a reminder of the precarity of the flesh.¹⁰ The dysfunction of Bitrán's subjects are deeply embedded in her depiction of them. In the painting-animations, the layers Bitrán creates form temporary boundaries – layers of skin – that are punctured and disrupted by her brush. Bitrán paints the animation frames on a single canvas in vibrant colors, blurring, obscuring, morphing, and erasing continuing lines and planes of color in order to create a sense of movement. Their ongoing flux is pronounced and articulated through shifting lines and colors. The paintings, like their subjects, exist in a state of temporal dysfunction, during which time they are physically transformed by the creation of layers much like a slowly healing scab. The surface of the painting itself becomes a space of rupture and collision between the artist and her subjects. The scab forms, is broken, opened once more, heals again, and – as the painting resolves – fades back into porous, fleshy skin or a scar marking its place. The energy of transformation is captured and reified by the video works which emphasize the rapturous, all-encumbering nature of metamorphosis through rupture. Through her technique, Bitrán embraces dysfunction as an agent for transcendence, as an opportunity for transformation of both the subject and their witness.

¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, "The Contingency of Pain," 26.

Ahmed makes clear that the existence of pain lies in its acknowledgement – by the feeler of the pain (the object whose surface is disturbed) and by the presence of a witness.¹¹ This complicates the nature of the subjects of *Fallen* because the teen girls are in a fugitive state of impairment. Bitrán's subjects do not acknowledge their pain; they remain unaware of their compromised state due to their complete inebriation. This act of non-acknowledgement is not a denial of the pain felt; rather, it is a byproduct of the distance placed between them and their bodies through the use of substances. Ahmed claims that "...experiences of dysfunction become lived as a return to the body, or a rendering of present to consciousness of what has become absent..."¹² Bitrán's subjects do not make this return – at least not within the videos. In fact, it is not clear that the subjects themselves would even describe these experiences or the videos memorializing their actions as painful. There is a level of skepticism both from the subject and the witness. Perhaps it is precisely this grey area that doubly gives the viewer permission to laugh – there are two boundaries: the screen and the subject herself, fully immersed in the spectacle of drunkenness – of malfunction, whether called "pain" or otherwise. However, this cession of power was not given willingly by the subjects. In the case of the original videos, which remain online, the subjects may eventually "return" to endure not only the pain of the experience but also the disturbing, abusive exploitation of it as entertainment.

In drunkenness, especially the state of total oblivion that Bitrán's subjects inhabit, there is a complex relationship between pain, distance, and agency. They exist in a liminal space of atemporality. Just as the viewer gains distance through the screen, drunkenness provides a filter – or distancing mechanism – for the subjects. We, as viewers, cannot know – beyond our sense of physical impact pains – if the subjects themselves are indeed suffering. We can only speculate. Yet, there is an undeniable joy present in these self-destructive displays of inebriation. To judge these women for their behavior would be to become, once again, the desensitized witness – removed, stoic. To judge is, again, to protect oneself – to move away from the abjectness that is the spectacle of a drunken body which defies all standard norms of assessment in its state of utter malfunction. Bitrán does not judge her subjects. In a simple and powerful gesture, she accepts their states of malfunction and engages with it deeply. Bitrán recentres her subjects and their experiences through her tedious animations which display an attitude of devotion and attentiveness towards these young women. She makes the layering of the compiled frames apparent, leaving traces of previous frames visible as she progresses

¹¹ Sara Ahmed, "The Contingency of Pain," 29 - 31.

¹² Ibid.

through the sequence of images, covering her prior work. In this action, there is an erasure of content not possible for the original videos which seem to exist in a permanent state of consumability via the internet. Bitrán makes the frames fleeting, ephemeral, escapable while also embodying them fully, leaving them beneath the surface of the canvas – the layers present but hidden. Her markings are glorious scars.

In the *Fallen* painting-animations, bodies progress through painful actions, arriving in the following frame with a readiness to be transformed and made beautiful by Bitrán's tender hand. The pain is present but not permanent; they make an impact on the canvas but are not memorialized or fetishized in their replay-ability. Eventually, the animation process ends, and with it, the painting is complete. On the canvas, Bitrán leaves present traces of impact, physical movement and dysfunction with sensual, expressive brush strokes and color that remind the viewer that there is a joy to their intoxicated state, a pleasure in their mental absence from the body and in simple teenaged debauchery. Bitrán's paintings do not illustrate the subjects' experiences but evoke them, mirroring the ways in which one may relay an anecdote of a painful experience: communicated in words that render it understood but blurry, left wanting by the limits of lingual expression.¹³ Yet, these young women need not explain themselves. In Bitrán herself they have found a trustworthy witness – one who honors the complexity of their pain and simultaneously acknowledges the youthful joy that is present in their recklessness.

It is in this powerful dichotomy of joy and pain that Bitrán's *Fallen* series transcends the limits of pain as spectacle and reinforces the wound as a moment of transformation. Bitrán's complications of the videos impedes the viewer's ability to consume mindlessly, the content must be considered, examined, contemplated. With a caring and non-judgemental attitude toward her subjects, Bitrán takes these exploitative videos and transforms them into something quite beautiful– an acknowledgement of women's pain that also displays their ecstasy in being momentarily freed from it.

Bitrán embodies much of Ahmed's theories on the witnessing of pain. She challenges her viewers to take on the weight of bearing witness to the discomfort and strangeness of another's pain without fetshizing, co-opting, or degrading it. However, she never prescribes how to be a witness. Treating her viewers as she treats her subjects, Bitrán passes no judgement for the witness who laughs. Rather, *Fallen* provides a space where viewers can reflect on their

¹³ Sara Ahmed, "The Contingency of Pain," 29.

relationship to witnessing. She invites the viewer to witness pain as serious but beautiful, horrifying but normal, awkward and– even sometimes– sort of funny in its peculiar nature. Yet, Bitrán does not allow the experiences of her subjects to be shirked off or used as mere entertainment. Instead, Bitrán threatens the social norms of negligence toward the feelings of women by exalting them without fetish and with the utmost tenderness. Bitrán reminds us that being a witness to someone else’s pain is most powerful when we arrive without judgement and with an openness to being affected and possibly transformed by what we see.

Endnotes

Ahmed, Sara. "The Contingency of Pain.," In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2014): 20-41.

Bitrán, Claudia. "Fallen." 2019. <https://www.claudiabitran.com/fallen-2019.html>

Bitrán, Claudia. "Fallen Claudia Bitran 2019 TV Installation." 2019. Vimeo video, 3:04. <https://vimeo.com/357440655>