

2022 INHABIT residency proposal
Sara Zak

I was 6 when my father's plane crashed into the mountains of Scotland, and my brain chemistry was forever altered. This childhood trauma resulted in memory loss, depression, adventure-seeking behavior, and chronic inflammation. After climbing my "dad's mountain" 40 years after his passing (2019), I became interested in the transformative effects of Awe on PTSD symptoms. Studies link experiencing Awe in nature to positive emotions in PTSD sufferers. How does this concept correlate to making and experiencing artwork?

According to Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt (2003), Awe is induced through "perceived vastness" and "a need for accommodation." In my artmaking process, I constantly set up "a need for accommodation;" I actively put systems and obstacles in my way in order to find new and unusual ways of problem-solving. I work impulsively so as to be constantly surprised (perceived vastness) by my work. One component of my proposed project uses the artist (myself) as subject to determine if dopamine levels increase as I create mini awe experiences through self and collaboratively imposed systems and obstacles. Does artmaking have healing properties for those with PTSD, and if so do the benefits differ if the artist experiences awe-related moments?"

In my current practice, one of my research threads is awe, abjection, and the sublime, or as a 2021 article by Robert R. Crewis aptly titled the sublime, "aesthetic awe." In collaboration with the scientists in Neuroscience at the Institute, I will create a site-specific immersive aesthetic experience. I have a background in creating these experiences. "This is Our Happy Place," a past site-specific work related to domesticity, awe, and memory, surprised viewers with a sense of hominess and comfort inside an abandoned grain silo. Sparkling white laundry hung on clothes lines and billowed in the immense dirty tower. The smell of cinnamon wafted heavily throughout the air, confusing and comforting many viewers. The bacteria growing on the table added a reminder of the silos' abandoned nature and their inherent decay. Another work, "Mother, I Ate You Up," brought viewers out to the forest to experience a dining table, chairs, and feast created solely for the forest animals. In order to get close to the art, viewers had to walk under a falling dead tree held aloft only by other trees. Working with those in Neuroscience, I will create an experience (without use of VR) built around parameters intended to cause a "perceived vastness" and "need for accommodation." The work will be sensorily all-encompassing and will challenge the viewers/participants' understanding of a space and/or their position in said-space.

Using a control group of viewers and a group of PTSD sufferers, we can collaborate to create a system of measurements (facial expression as registered via camera, before/after surveys, etc) to learn if the viewers who have experienced trauma/PTSD are affected differently by the experience. I am positive that working with the Institute's scientists will raise many more relevant questions as the project and outcomes develop.