

IN EXCHANGE

In Exchange

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Printmaking in the Department of Fine Arts of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

by

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2018

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This thesis parses the dynamics of emotional labor in personal relationships. By bringing softness, connection and exposure to the viewer's body in the form of tactile experience and wearable sculpture, this book and the installation that it accompanies provide a physical lens through which to consider the challenges of reciprocity and the emotional experiences that are at stake in a struggle for balance and mutuality in relationships.

Many thanks to Elizabeth Duffy, Megan Foster, Andrew Raftery, Karen Schiff and Jonathan Weinberg for their guidance and support.

IT WAS NOTHING

WAS IT NOTHING?

Consider our daily performances.

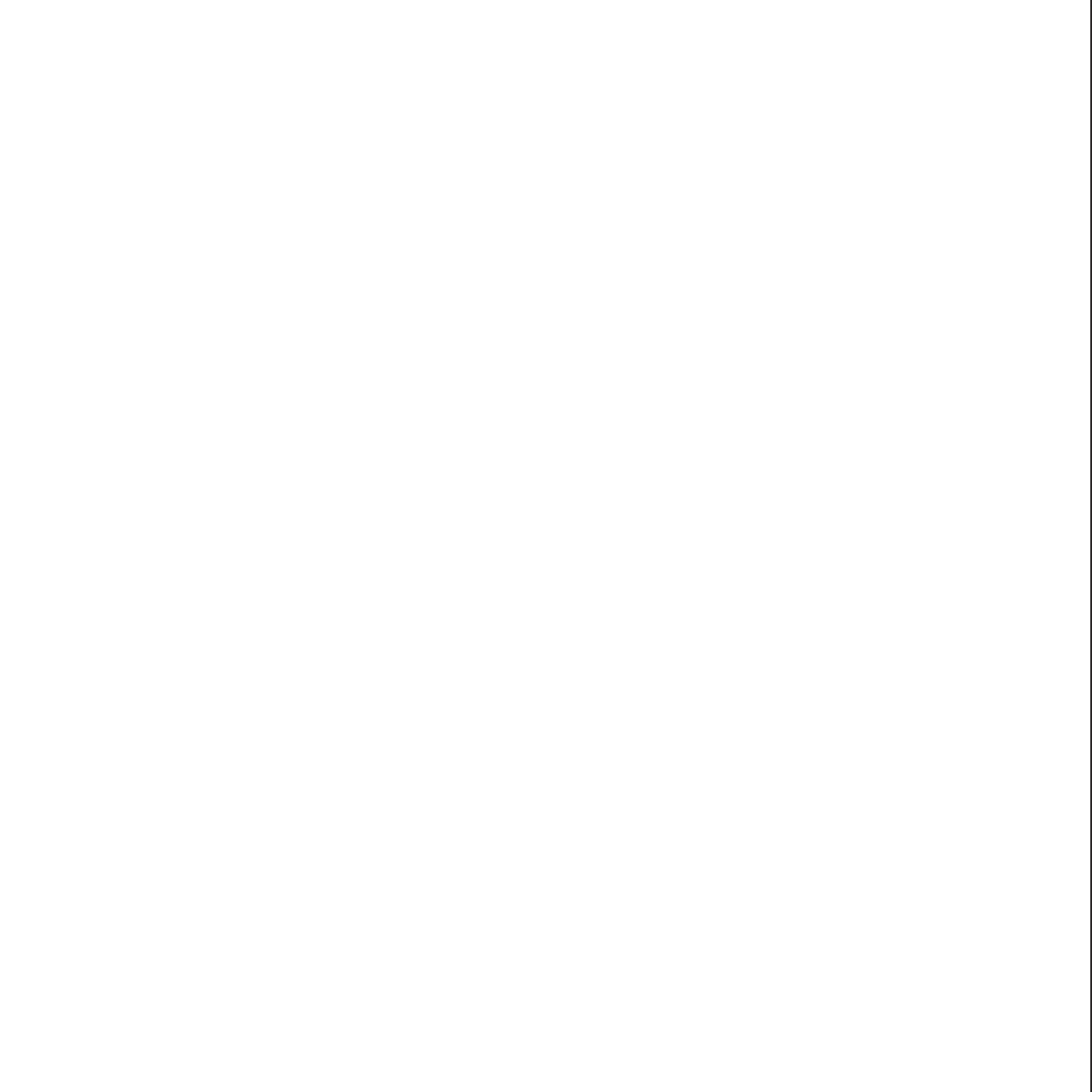
Rehearsed behaviors of care become costumes.
Beneath them lie earnest intentions, conflicting
desires, willingness and resistance alike.



It's easy not to think of care as work, even though its unnamable weight and strange exhaustion balance its warmth.

Standing at different points in a social landscape—as partner, lover, child, guardian, student, teacher, friend—we learn to pour care into some people, and to soak it up from others.

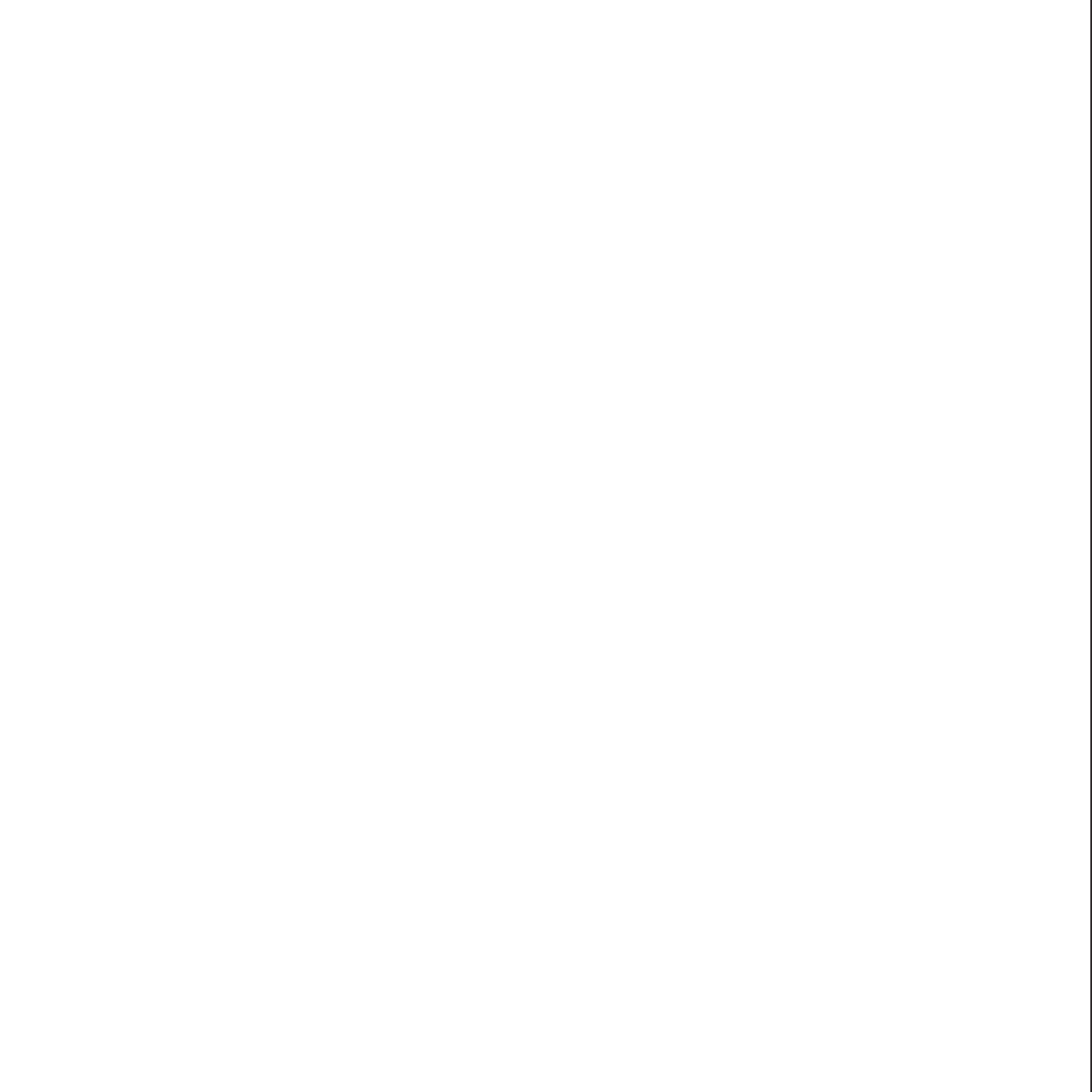
Emotional labor manifests in the work we put toward nurturing the happiness of others. We draw from our own reserves of feeling, and use them to bolster a sense of comfort and wellbeing in those we care for.



These exchanges are nuanced. So often they are undefined by any easily quantifiable trace. They exist in presences, silences, words, caresses, quiet and precious offerings of time and attention. Easy to consume, and easy to overlook.

I want generosity as much as I want
consciousness. I celebrate care as I criticize its
politics. I honor the effort and strain that this
labor incurs, its crushing expectations along
with its nebulous joys.

The cadence of reciprocity undulates and
buckles, its tension stretches and snaps.
We are wrapped in it.



MY PLEASURE

ERASURE

I make daily efforts to be gracious in exchanges large and small, because it's the way I've learned to be. I say words to make others feel comfortable.

Sometimes I mean them heartily.

Sometimes I don't think about them at all.

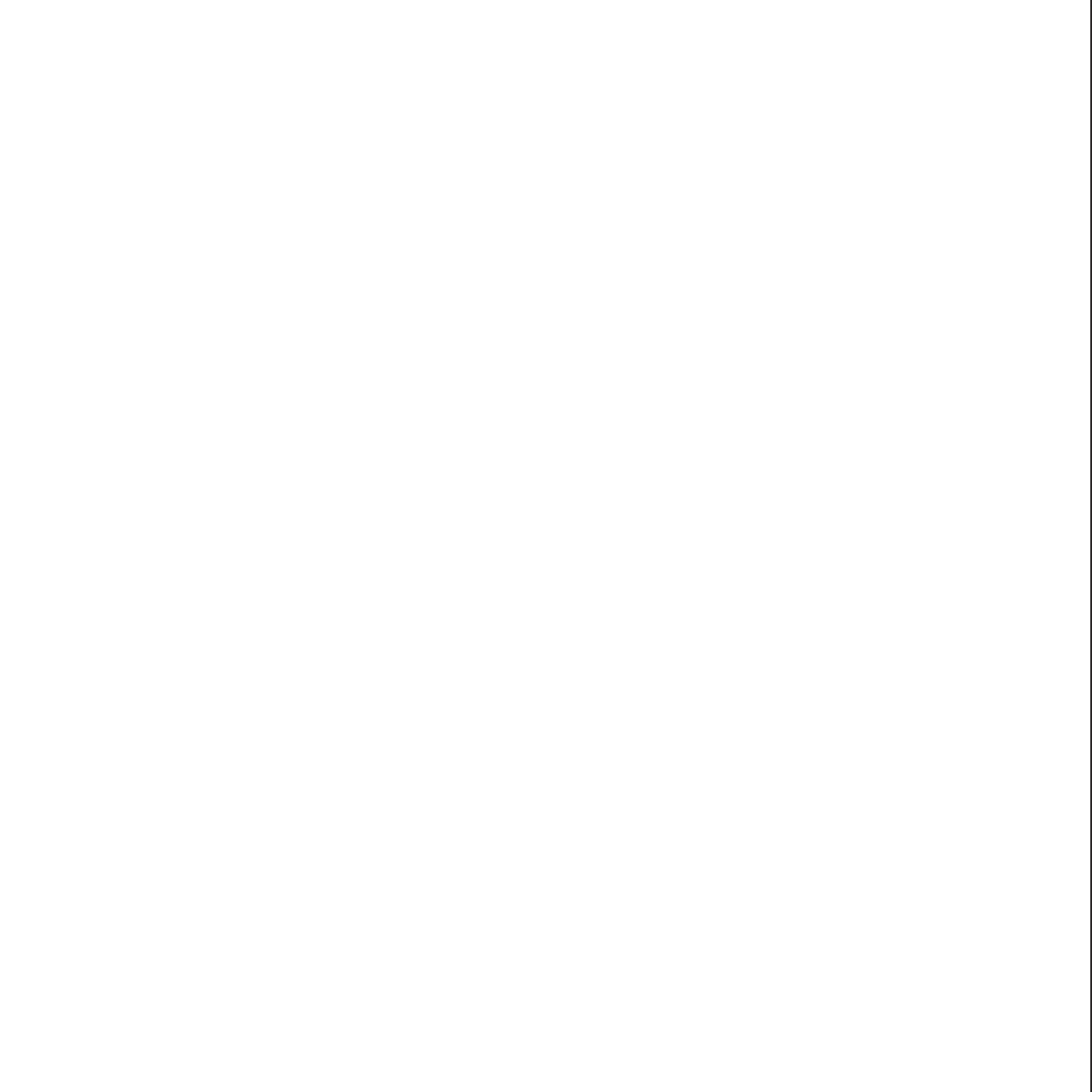
Sometimes they are damaging, negating my own efforts and compromises in a performance of easy selflessness.

Layers of emotional fortitude cover us,
insulating our inner life. We strip them away and
give them to others, performing a sweet, sore,
awkward dance of exposure and nurturance.

We take from others, wrapping ourselves in their
attention, their advice, their love, their presence.
We are left connected, drained and full.



ALLOW ME



ME



I prod and pull at my own resistance to
tenderness. Underneath pink layers, hesitance
is still there; my own deeply internalized
revulsion to softness is as gripping as my
desire for it.

In making work about vulnerability and connection, I encounter paradoxes and barriers. Self-consciousness, shame and fragility float to the surface as I sift through personal experience, searching for an honest means of expression.

Intimate form, malleable material, layered language and the persistence of pattern articulate the emotional dynamics that so privately and powerfully impact my own life and others.

HELP YOURSELF

YOU



Partnerships abound, and with them come scripts. Our performances of nurturance can feel rehearsed just as much as they can create points of deep connection, leaving opportunities to be transparent. To be mutually seen, felt, understood.

To ask who gives and receives emotional labor
is to acknowledge a politics of reciprocity.

How we expend and absorb care is determined
by who we learn to be.