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A House Not of Our Choosing

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art and Design

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

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by

Melisa D. Cadell

May 2013

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Andrew Scott Ross

Keywords: Figure, Sculpture, Paper, Ceramic, Installation

## ABSTRACT

A House Not of Our Choosing

by

Melisa Cadell

This thesis explores our existence through the confinement of the human body. The exhibition of “A House Not of Our Choosing,” was presented at the Tipton Gallery, 126 Spring Street Johnson City, Tennessee, from March 1, 2013, to March 8, 2013. It will visually describe Cadell’s thoughts regarding the figure as a fragile vessel. The installation is designed to require the viewer to closely examine the work from multiple perspectives.

The exhibition consists of sculpted paper, etched, painted, manipulated glass slides, and projection. Research discusses the work produced over a three-year period. Exploration and reflection in the areas of religion, history, philosophy and psychology contributed to the knowledge which inspired the exhibit.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This achievement would not have been possible without the help of others. To my committee, I thank them for their patience and guidance as I explored the avenues that led me to personal discoveries and endless possibilities. Their insight was crucial to my developing the work and the research. I would also like to thank my friends and fellow graduate students, Maja Savic for showing me the potential that lie in moving imagery and Sherry Murphy for lending her expertise in pulling plaster molds.

Further appreciation goes to my mother and father, Pat and George Cadell, for fostering my fascination with the unknown. A special thanks to Penny Golabek, my children's adopted aunt, who watched after them when my husband and I could not.

And, ultimately, I am most grateful to my husband, Mark Wessinger, who unselfishly sacrificed the time and energy to support my efforts to pursue the opportunity to become a better artist and teacher. I thank him and my children, Ben and Ana Jewel for my time to play.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
LIST OF FIGURES.....	4
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	6
2. WOMEN ARE NOT MEN.....	8
3. MYSTERY.....	10
4. FINDING ONE’S WAY.....	14
5. UNDER MY NAILS.....	16
6. WORKING WITHIN THE UNKOWN.....	20
7. IMAGE.....	24
8. TOWARD.....	26
9. WHAT IS INVISIBLE? .....	30
10. CASTING SHADOWS.....	33
11. PAIN.....	38
12. OBSCURE.....	42
13. WHY DO YOU SAY KNOWLEDGE IS EVIL? .....	46
14. FRAGILITY AND TRANSCENDENCE.....	49
15. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	60
WORKS CITED.....	61
VITA.....	64

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. <i>She Held To</i> .....	22
2. <i>Perhaps</i> .....	23
3. <i>Toward I</i> .....	28
4. <i>Toward II</i> .....	29
5. <i>Invisible</i> .....	31
6. <i>Her Seven Years</i> .....	32
7. <i>Burning of the Feminine</i> .....	37
8. <i>Silent</i> .....	41
9. <i>Obscure</i> .....	45
10. Process Photos of <i>You Must Not</i> .....	48
11. <i>A House Not of Our Choosing</i> .....	54
12. <i>A House Not of Our Choosing (Detail)</i> .....	55
13. <i>A House Not of Our Choosing (Detail)</i> .....	56
14. <i>A House Not of Our Choosing (Detail)</i> .....	57
15. <i>A House Not of Our Choosing (Detail)</i> .....	58
16. <i>A House Not of Our Choosing (Detail)</i> .....	59

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“I want to serve. I want to serve the people. I want every girl, every child, to be educated.”

Malala Yousufzai

Malala Yousufzai became an internationally known figure when she stood up and demanded that she be given the right to an education. She wrote a blog for the BBC. The Taliban shot the Pakistani youth activist on October 9, 2012 (Topping).

Malala, now age 15, is one of many girls and women who have been injured, maimed, or murdered due to their desire to have an independent life. She was targeted because she is a female who demands to be educated like her male counterparts. Shot in the head at point blank range, she survived but is continuing extensive surgical and physical therapies for her injuries. She remained silent about her ordeal until February 4, 2013. She remains an activist for the rights of girls and women to be educated and began a fund for the education of girls (Topping).

Her family supports her right to an education as well as do many people in her native country. She was awarded the Pakistani National Youth Peace Prize before the attack. The award does not validate her efforts but her passion for equality does (Topping).

Women are a central focus in my work, yet, I feel the work reaches beyond gender. I am keenly aware of the boundaries posed by my being a woman. And though I have lived in the United States, I understand that equality is an issue that still must be seriously considered.

The Equal Rights Amendment for women still has not been ratified by enough states in the union to become an amendment. Three more states must ratify it for it to pass. For example, North Carolina, the state I currently reside in has not ratified it and if I own land in the state, my husband's name has to be on the deed. The current Congress, 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, is “proposing an

amendment to the Constitution of the United States relative to the equal rights for men and women,” in Bill S.J. Res.10 (Mendez).

Women are not considered equal citizens around the world; there remains a defined role for women and men within each culture that is biased. These inequalities are important to me, whether they be based on gender, sexual orientation, race, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, or nationality.



## CHAPTER 2

### WOMEN ARE NOT MEN

I find power in being a woman. I am braver because of my children. I feel equal to my husband. These things I know, but if I lived in another place or time it may not be so. The challenge of being who I want to be is palpable. Politicians and religious figures sometimes use damaging rhetoric to cause fear and win power. This type of assumed power has formed the existence for millions of women around the world. It will continue to shape life for my daughter. Power remains in flux and demands careful attention. The content and purpose of my work is more vocal than it was before my daughter was born.

There was an important period before my undergraduate studies, when I visited rural communities in the US; St. Kitts, VI; and Belize, Central America to participate in mission type work. For the first time, I began to question the unfair distribution of power and wealth in different areas. I witnessed poverty and poor living conditions. I was struck by the dignity of the women within these communities to struggle for a daily existence. I was also aware that they would most likely not escape their lot in life, either because of politics or religious beliefs. It was in part because of the role they had been assigned by society. The pride and fortitude in their faces are images that remain seared into my memory. It has burned deep within me a need to bear witness to their lives.

“She will never get to go to school, although I think she wants to” (D’Aluisio 81). The interviewer, Melissa Farlow, speaks about a young girl in Ethiopia who will probably never attend school because she is needed at home to complete the chores. The role she plays is the same as that of her mother. Her mother wants her to attend school but without her help the mother could not complete the work needed to sustain the family. Another woman makes the comment, “I do not want more children, but if God wishes, what can I do?” (D’Aluisio108).

In the book, Women in the Material World, the daily lives of women are catalogued and compared chapter by chapter. The worth of the individuals varies with the cultural norms of the societies in which they live and the status they hold within those societies (D’Aluisio 9-256). It

documents the daily routines of each woman and her family. It is a sobering look at how women in many parts of the world continue to live without education, birth control, and the right to own property. Women and children, in particular, suffer greatly at the hands of others that are deemed more important. Many have become nameless and faceless even in our own society. Often they are valued only for the children they produce and the work-load they can bear.

## CHAPTER 3

### MYSTERY

Art has become the lens I look through to explore and define my understanding of the world. It has facilitated the role I play as a participant. I continue to search out those things that bring about a more complete view.

At the age of nine or ten, my parents took me to the exhibition Pompeii. On display were some of the most delicate glass objects I had ever seen. The pastel palette and attention to detail was amazing. How very fragile they were. Then as my mind remembers it, I came to the area where the bodies were. I cannot remember anything else from the exhibit that held my interest after that. I looked down upon huddled figures that were so profoundly and hauntingly beautiful, it stole my breath. I was transported by the epiphany that life existed one moment and was destroyed the next. What happened in that one moment? It was eerily transforming as I stood there in that sacred place. These bodies had been raptured up by the volcano. It is still so vivid in my mind's eye. The life casts of those who had been enveloped by the gasses and eventually the lava of the volcanic ash and magma were sitting in front of me. I could have easily leaned in and touched their heads. I was drawn into the daily existence of that world that once was, but was then destroyed. Moments in time existed and then existed no more. This is what life was. The small fragments of time that become unraveled give a brief moment to contemplate what our existence means.

Religion has been the means of searching out the mysteries surrounding life for thousands of years. The oldest of all the organized world religions is Hinduism. Nataraja Shiva or Siva, a deity of immense complexity, belongs to the long lineage of Hindu gods. The research into Hinduism gave me pause to think about how it is similar rather than different from the Western understanding of God.

According to John D. La Plante,

In theory Hinduism is simple. In practice it is extremely complex. Its basic tenet is that the only real existence is Brahman, and that existence as we know it is illusory. Our separate selves seem to exist individually only because we have not learned that “we” do not exist. Thus the aim of Hinduism is the discovery of the true nature of the self (atman) and the true nature of the undifferentiated eternal principle of existence which is Brahman. When these two realities are fully grasped they are seen to be one, without separateness or differentiation, and at once we are aware that Brahman is us as well as everything else that is (44).

All the other Hindu deities are attributes of Brahman personified. Nataraja Siva is the deity of both destruction and creation, and in my thoughts, resembles the God of the Old Testament.

The cosmic dance of Siva is, at its roots the manifestation of prima, rhythmic energy, in the ananda-tandava mode, it is as Coomaraswamy said, “The clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of” (Gray 78).

The cosmic dance is part of the cycle that keeps death and rebirth going. Siva is encircled by a ring of fire which destroys the cycle of rebirth, (samsara.) This symbolizes the ultimate destruction of the natural world and the ego centered reality that everyone must shed in order to become one with Brahman. Nataraja Siva is depicted, at times, as both male and female. The rhythmic energy that is depicted in skillfully rendered bronze sculptures from the early 1000c give a striking visual of the faith. One is quickly transported to the antithesis of destruction as creation is revealed in the poetic circular form; captured in a precise moment, this dance is one of beauty and elegance, power and benevolence. Siva embodies the sky, sun, and moon. The deity is personified wisdom, enlightenment, word of god, protection, liberation, control, compassion, enlightenment, and the distractor of evil (Siva Nataraja).

Even if we do not hold to the belief of Hinduism, most of us understand how life is interconnected. In a sense, we are all in a dance between life and destruction. Sometimes this is an exquisite orderly process and other times it is an abhorrent and violent one.

If one examines the basic life cycle of a tree, then the symbolic Dance of Siva should make sense even to our Western minds. A tree holds within itself the capacity to give birth to itself. When a tree dies it leaves behind its trunk and branches which decompose to become future soil. Its seeds fall to grow more of its kind. In a lifetime it provides a habitat for many other life forms. It gives us fuel for heat and lumber for building. The tree form inspires poets to contemplate life and the meaning of it. It sustains all life by giving off oxygen in its chemical processes of sustaining its own life. The cycle of life is made clear in nature.

Science, too, examines the mysteries of our universe. CERN is the European Center for Research in Particle Physics in Geneva, Switzerland. It is world renowned for its research of the smallest subatomic particles known to humankind. Recently, it believes it found the Higgs Boson Particle, which is the smallest subatomic particle yet documented. According to an article published in the National Geographic, July 4, 2012, “The long-sought after, particle may complete the standard model of physics by explaining why objects in our universe have mass—and in so doing, why galaxies, planets, and even humans have any right to exist” (Than).

The “God Particle,” if confirmed would help explain how, “some particles, such as quarks—building blocks of protons, among other things - and electrons have mass, while others, such as the light-carrying photon particle, do not. (Than) Peter Higgs, in the 1960s proposed this theory. It has not been possible to test it until now. CERN’s 17- mile-long tunnel buried deep within the earth provided a safe place to magnetically collide particles using an electric field. This collision was used to mimic the “Big Bang.” The particles exploded and decayed giving only a brief fraction of a second to see if the particles resembled Higgs theoretical “God Particle.” It seems the test is pointing toward the existence of this theory (Than).

The metaphor of the dance is a perfect visual representation of the patterns of the unseen world of protons, neutrons, electrons, and photons. The diagrams used to illustrate the interactions look like they could be charted dances (Capra 245). Capra quotes Coomaraswamy, an Indian art historian and philosopher born in 1877. “The metaphor of the cosmic dance thus unifies ancient mythology, religious art, and modern physics” (Shiva’s Cosmic Dance).

In 2004, The Indian Government dedicated a sculpture of Siva Nataraja to the CERN research facility. The reasoning behind this gift is not difficult to understand if you follow the reasoning of Fritjof Capra(Shiva's Cosmic Dance ). In his book the Tao of Physics, published in 1975, he dedicates an entire chapter to "*The Cosmic Dance of Siva.*" The chapter begins with the explanation of the subatomic world. The flow of energy and the creation/destruction of this energy are discussed at length (Capra 245).

CHAPTER 4  
FINDING ONE'S WAY

“It always comes back to this: that only one’s inner feelings represent the truth.”

Kaethe Kollwitz, April 20,1916

I believe the German Expressionist, printmaker, Kaethe Kolwitz, is speaking to the reality of truth and how it is different for everyone and thus easily manipulated. What is Truth? It is an age old question debated by theologians, historians, philosophers, and art critics. In my understanding, truth is illusive at best and it varies from one individual to another. Follow this reasoning. Reading a history book will prove the point I am trying to make. The point of view of the author determines how history is recorded. The interpretation of truth adjusts from one culture to another depending on who conquers whom. Truth can then, only be defined by the individual within those particular circumstances. The more difficult the circumstance is, the more difficult the truth is.

Working as I do with a Volunteer Fire Department, one quickly realizes that fact is not truth and truth is not fact. When media or gossip “gets ahold,” of “what really happened,” it is usually not what “really,” happened. Or perhaps, I should say that it is not the case for the individuals who were involved or helped in stabilizing and cleaning up the incident.

It is like many things in life but with variations. What is life like for a soldier or a civilian caught up in war? I will not pretend to know. Intensity confounds logic and what it means to be human. What is it like to do the best one can in a particular situation? It is complex. It is disheveled at best. We all survive those situations the best we can.

There is no doubt that my art is influenced by Cristina Cordova, who creates work that, “is meant to address people that thrive in environments of emotional density” (Shultz 51). I studied under Cordova in 2005, prior to attending East Tennessee State University. She helped shape my consideration of the figure in clay. Her attention to detail and fascination with

experimentation places her sculpture in the upper echelon of the clay world. She has a working knowledge of the human form, understanding of human psyche, and skill with surface-treatments which culminate to make her work provocative. I began to more fully recognize that the figure has the ability to transport an individual to an emotional realm that can be penetratingly powerful.



## CHAPTER 5

### UNDER MY NAILS

I have used clay as a medium in my figurative work for fifteen years. I feel comfortable expressing my thoughts through the medium of clay. It has become second nature to pick up a piece of clay and create a face that might express any emotion. I have come to appreciate the limits of clay as well as its versatility.

I use mostly low fire clay bodies that mature at 1926 degrees F. I work with a variety of plaster molds to help create series of work. I create the original in clay and then pour or form a plaster mold over the clay. This was a skill I acquired during my foundry experience working for my father in his studio.

Building with a mold makes sense with the limited time I have available since becoming a mother. It allows me the opportunity to concentrate on content. I do not have to worry about figuring proportion or placement. I can work with the new clay cast to change gender, distribute weight, and adjust expression. This is because I use the molds as press molds. I press soft clay into the mold and pull it out while it is still moist. This makes it possible for me to manipulate it easily.

Not all of my sculpture is formed using molds. I also use slab techniques to build hollow forms. Some clay sculptors work solidly to build their forms and hollow them out when the clay stiffens up. I prefer beginning with a hollow interior so that I can push from the inside to form the structure of the outside. It is important to give the work breath. The most successful way for me to do this is to manipulate the clay by pushing and pulling on the ½” to 1” slabs. I like to establish the appearance of a bone structure from the beginning. When we look at the human figure, we see a culmination of what lies under the skin. The appearance depends on bone structure, muscle development, and the amount of fatty tissue which lies under the outer skin.

Over the years my awareness of the figure has become more refined. My figures started out stylized. Although elongated, they are mostly anatomically correct. I do take artistic license to render as I see fit. I was influenced early on by the Mannerist painters from Florence and

Rome. Parmigianino's Madonna with the Long Neck is one of the works I still recall from an art appreciation class more than 20 years ago. The more exaggerated proportions also show up in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel works. These include the Libyan Sibyl and even more notably The Last Judgment.

Armatures or the propping up of some sculpture, while it is still wet, is critical to the outcome of a piece. Although many of my works do not have a true internal armature, you will often find pillows and dowel rods helping to hold the arms, hands, or heads in distinct positions.

One of the final stages in producing a figure made of clay, is the consideration required to choose and execute the surface treatment. Surface is the first thing that a viewer will notice and that impression will ultimately form the overall perception. It can be left naked or it can be gilded; there are countless possibilities between the two. It took me many years to make electric-fired work look the way I wanted it to.

Mark Burlison is a clay sculptor who teaches at Georgia State University and is the author of the widely used book among new clay enthusiasts, The Ceramic Glaze Handbook. His guidance while at Odyssey Clay Craft Center in Asheville, NC, provided me with the basics of working with electric fired surfaces that are complex and sophisticated.

Unlike surfaces that are fired multiple times I have developed a way to once fire green ware. Green ware is clay work that has not yet been fired. When the clay becomes bone dry, I apply under-glaze and layer wax over this. Then I apply glaze, sometimes wiping off excess glaze in order to achieve a stressed surface.

Electric kiln firings are usually considered only necessary for the bisque firing by those who use atmospheric kilns such as gas fired reduction, wood, soda or salt. The electric kiln, which I use for convenience, creates an oxidation within its chamber which does not add anything exciting to the surface of a piece unless you use the appropriate chemical balance of glazes in the kiln. In other words, most electric fired surfaces are quite boring. "(Electric Kilns) do not add much value to your work—they let you add value to your work. Kilns of this sort are useful and unassuming--they get out of the way and let you go about the business of making objects of special character"(Zakin 11).

Extensive testing of glazes and surfaces must be performed in order to understand the possibilities. Sculpture poses certain challenges so that the surface does not detract from the form but instead enhances it. Often layers of surface must be experimented with. Each combination of material yields a different result because the glazes are chemically formulated to produce certain calculated results. Oxidation in a kiln affects the glazes differently than reduction firing. For example, copper will yield a green color if it is oxidized and red if it is heavily reduced. It takes years to develop a rich surface that is complimentary to sculptural forms.

I work with commercial under-glazes and glazes and purchase them primarily from AMACO. The under-glazes are merely clay liquids that are a mixture of clay and chemical colorants. They have dye mixed in so that one can visually mix the color like a painter would. The company has sponsored classes I have taught allowing me to test new products and help market the ones I am already familiar with. Working with the company has become a good professional relationship which started with a conversation I had with a chemist from the company.

“A glaze is formed by mixing specific amounts of materials together in water where they are held in suspension by viscosity of the fluid” (Burlison 12). Glaze, a substance that is clay, silica, and chemical/ mineral colorants does not appear in its wet state as a color that it will later become when fired. For example, a green colored wet glaze may fire red. Over the years I have used the AMACO products in non-traditional ways by mixing in things such as sand and salt to create a variety of surfaces. I have also come across recipes for glazes that add to my palette. Experimentation is necessary if one is to create a surface that evokes a personal response. Glazes or certain surface treatments often become trade-marks of the artist.

Post fired surfaces are currently acceptable on sculpture and I employ them often. This has not always been the case. In the “craft world,” fired on surfaces remain the most revered. It is a conscious decision that artists have to make when deciding what will become the “skin,” of the work. I sometimes use graphite, bees wax, and/or watercolor after the firing to enrich areas or entire pieces. Grout and cement patch material may be used to build up the texture of work. I have found that tests and understanding of what I want a surface to evoke in work are critical. These post-firing processes are also useful in terms of repair that often is needed in sculptural forms. It must be masterfully applied to create the appropriate exterior of a sculpture.

The history of clay is rich. In some mythologies, man is created out of clay. It is true that human kind has had an intimate relationship with clay from very early in its origins. Clay has been used medicinally, cosmetically, architecturally, and in domestic utilitarian vessels. For me, building with clay provides a connection with the earth that many people cannot comprehend in today's modern technological environment.

## CHAPTER 6

### WORKING WITHIN THE KNOWN

It is important to note I began my graduate studies by working with what was familiar, with the clay. I focused on creating a sense of movement within the clay sculpture, something that was lacking before. There are some pieces from my earlier semesters that I feel speak to the ideas and led me to further explore new techniques and content. I will discuss those now.

Working with the human form is not an attempt to idealize beauty. Rather the figure is something capable of showing vulnerability as well as resiliency. When we view a human body it is possible that we recognize the most basic level of our existence. We can connect its meaning to what we know and understand. It gives us a point at which to begin an inner dialogue. James Elkins discusses in his book, Pictures of the Body, Pain and Metamorphosis, the attention we pay when we look upon the human form. Our mind holds a certain affinity for it. “When there is a body to be seen, we focus on it with a particular relaxed concentration: there is a determined, sinuous, insistent gaze we reserve for bodies and faces” (Elkins 5). We search for a meaning that is relevant to the self because we carefully examine it. We give it a particular attention that we do not give to other objects.

She Held to Her (Figure 1) is a clay piece, which examines gender, sexuality, the loss of youth, and finally mortality. Its meaning is uncertain to viewers and possesses a quality that I strive for but do not always achieve. It is a tender expression as well as a rebuttal of that gentle touch. It is divided by black and white as well as youth and old age. I am fascinated with the multiple readings it has received. In a world that is obsessed with sound-bites that leave out so much about our humanity, I strive to challenge the audience to discuss the more delicate matters that will lead to a more tolerant perception.

Perhaps (Figure 2) is part of a series of sculpture that attempts to put the mystery back into faith; the believing of something unseen. Losing truth in the details seems inevitable in an environment where there is only wrong and right. Playing with relationships in the format of the images from the Sistine Chapel allowed me to question what faith has become. It is my attempt

to challenge the dialogue in the arena of literalism. I often think about how poetry has the ability to offer powerful meanings; more so than, perhaps factual information. This work has led me to other ideas that search for questions rather than answers. The view of Adam is one of a naked man reaching but not looking at God. He seems taken with himself in a relaxed way. He is covered with fur and appears to be more ape-like than human, if the viewer looks at the left side of his face that is placed against the wall. God neither looks at Adam or Eve. Eve floats above the outstretched hands that have no chance of ever meeting. Eve is white and covered with crackled glaze surface. Contorted, she looks distraught at the role she has. She, of course, is not in the original composition but I felt she needed to be represented. The palms of Adam, Eve, and God are all surfaced with an under-glaze that is a rich terracotta red color. This has come to symbolize in many of my sculptures the idea that we all are marked by our experiences. As the hands are positioned, they form a focal point that makes a triad. God is represented in a literal body that is both male and female. God is embraced by a feminine figure and is being held up by a strong figure that is dark and earthy. The infant is cherub like and contemplative, not at all interested in the drama.

I am interested in challenging people's perception and their beliefs because religion is a powerful force in how people interpret the world. People should understand that information and theologies have been developed over a long period of time. In today's religious circles, theology is going through another transformation. The Great Emergence, by Phyllis Tickle, first published in 2008 discusses why the Christian Church is in flux at this time in history.

The internet, multiculturalism, and economic factors all have contributed to a process that has happened throughout history. Religion changes or it does not survive. These movements range from the "Fall of the Roman Empire," through the Reformation to its current status. Each transformation happens close to every 500 years. "The Great Emergence," according to Tickle, is the next step if the Christian religion wants to remain relevant to its constituency. There are fissures within the walls of every Christian denomination, as well as other world religions and even atheism. The divide between extremist and liberals within each group grows as the world diversifies and comes to terms with how everything continues to evolve and change. Tolerance and understanding of humanity is slowly eroding away the ideas of those who continue to organize religious power (Tickle Loc.132,133).



Figure 1.

*She Held To*

2011, Earthen Ware, 23H" X 10W" X 3D"



Figure 2.

*Perhaps,*

2011, Earthenware, 20”H X 2.5”W X 3.5”D (foot print)



## CHAPTER 7

### IMAGE

I remember reading the Bible as a child and trying to picture what a graven image or an idol might look like. This image of a god was considered an abomination, something forbidden. These scriptures were meant to deter one from seeking other deities and in some sense seemed to warn against the beauty of the body. Yet to me the body has never seemed sinful. I find sacredness in working with the figure, making a likeness of a god or human to consider seriously. After all, was not humankind, in scriptural thought, made in the image of God? These thoughts intrigue me as I think about my tendency to record my thoughts with the use of the figure.

The figure holds within its house of skin the essence, the physicality, the completeness of our being. Layers form the body that contains our being until it remembers its mortality. The human form has, for me, become a metaphorical shelter for the soul. It is both sacred and carnal. It is fragile and extremely resilient. The figure is many things at once. It is a playground for artists who want to explore its hidden rooms of insight and /or its deception.

My affinity with the figure is not a random one; it mirrors a need to look at who I am. Within what context do I see myself, do I see humankind? What privilege and what boundaries does the body pose?

Gender, nationality, faith, sexual orientation, race, class, and culture place each of us within a certain type of architecture. It is a house not of our choosing. We are judged and viewed through its exterior. The interior is not fully appreciated because doors of social norm do not allow full viewing. This along with an individual's own defense mechanisms both sustains and defeats us.

Being comfortable with the nude human form is not always socially accepted. Even my "Art minded" parents were upset when I told them about modeling for drawing classes during my undergraduate studies. When I decided to use a nude photograph on show postcards and posters for my culminating show there was a great deal of discussion about that as well.

I find it peculiar when placing surface on a clay sculpture which is nude, that if I “paint,” clothing on the body, it is read as being clothed. This is queer phenomena as we know by closer examination that the form is nude and defined with genitalia and nipples. It is an experiment I have been engaged in if only for my own amusement. My four year old daughter does not understand why she can draw a “belly button,” (at school,) but not nipples when drawing a person. Children do not yet understand the “shame” of nakedness, although my nine year old son is getting close.

None of us during adolescence are completely comfortable “in our own skin.” There is always something we wish were different, something more refined, bigger or stronger. It seems that just about the time we become familiar with it, the body begins to age rapidly and the change poses new uncertainties for us.

In my mid-twenties, just about the time the seat-belt law was in-acted, but before it was too strictly enforced, I had an automobile accident that greatly scarred my nose and face. If I’d been fastened in, the injuries would have been minor if any. For weeks my appearance was, to say at the least, hideous. The way people looked at me in the grocery store was frightful. Before the accident, I wasn’t aware of how much one’s outer appearance affected others. I wasn’t allowed to work as a waitress for about a month. It would have sickened the patronage according to my manager. People either looked at me with pity or couldn’t bear it at all.

I began to think about how I viewed others or judged them according to their outward appearance. People are, to themselves, who they are. The way they think and feel is normal. Who are we to judge based on what is only limited in its visual presentation? The accident completely humbled me and made me aware that we are all confined within the skin of our being. How it appears, determines how others treat us.

## CHAPTER 8

### TOWARD

The perception of those around us partly shapes our own reality. What would it be like if people could see each individual from other viewpoints, or in different settings, see more than just one perspective? It has been a goal of mine, when creating a sculpture or installation, to include more than one possible narrative. Layers of meaning begin to emerge from within the surface of the sculpture. Then those strata pull the viewer inward toward the essence of the piece.

Context is important. It can completely change the meaning of things. I was made keenly aware of this when completing an installation in the former morgue at ETSU.

Paper, water, fate, forming figures out of paper and submerging their feet in water seemed appropriate to discussing our mortality, the mortality we all share. Using materials that are counter intuitive to my understanding as a sculptor, who makes objects to last, opened doors of new insight.

I cast figures in plaster molds using tissue thin toilet paper. Bees-wax was painted from behind so that the paper quality would be protected. Wax coated the exterior of the feet up to the ankles. The feet were submerged in water trays. Within each water tray small candles floated. The 2'X4' sealed wooden trays were low in profile and painted black as not to be distracting to the viewer. The trays blended in with the floor when placed in a dark environment. The figures standing in the water were translucent and frail in appearance.

The installation Toward (Figure 3) was set in the lower bowels of the Campus Center Building in the basement that had once housed the morgue as well as the area where animal testing occurred on a chimpanzee.

In the main and central room, figures carrying damaged boats were staged in a line toward the only entrance/exit. In the rooms that lead off the main room, vignettes were set up. In the small cooler, lined with shelves, a triptych of figures formed an altar in water and was surrounded with warm candlelight. (Figure 3) Within a room that was partially dug out and filled

with bio-hazard receptacles, a lone figure was trapped by her own feet which pierced through a boat. The doomed boat was filled with dirt from the room. In the final room, a figure lying in a boat hung gracefully from the ceiling over water and candles. She looked as if she was in a pyre about to be set on fire. The rooms grew darker as candles begin to extinguish themselves in the water.

The installation played on the Greek mythology about the River Styx. The difference in this rendition was that there was no boatman to guide the souls to their fate. Instead every soul had to carry their broken boats through the dark water. The useless boats became the accoutrements that had been collected during life and were ineffective in the final course of the journey. There were various references to religious myths in the work. Each figure carried boats which symbolize the burdens of life as defined in the Christian thought of bearing one's cross. The figures were walking toward something unknown and uncertain.

The dark and dank environment of the basement was oppressive. Although the installation was powerful in its feel, its presence was somewhat diminished by the viewers' prior knowledge of what had been previously housed in the space.

I later installed the pieces on a pond in my community. (Figure 4) In surveying and looking at how the setting changed the feel of the piece, I became acutely aware of the meaning of context. The core ideas were the same but the aura completely changed. It gained a breath and light which defined the work as transformative. I appreciate both of the settings, the morgue and the pond. Each venue was intensely different. As an artist, I was able to depict fear and peace with the same body of work. The context of the work changed the delivery of the idea profoundly. It is easy to see how manipulation of reality is accomplished by those who have the power to do so.

The installation experience of Toward helped move my understanding of sculpture off of the pedestal. I now think about the space or environment as being crucial to the meaning of my art.



Figure 3

*Toward I*

2012, Cast Paper and Bees Wax, Water and Candles,



Figure 4

*Toward II*

2012, Cast Paper and Bees Wax, Wooden Trays, and Candles,

Each Figure: 23”H X 4”W X 3.5D

## CHAPTER 9

### WHAT IS INVISIBLE?

Invisible (Figure 5) is a series of small cast ice sculptures. I made a silicone rubber mold so that I could cast multiple types of material in the same mold. My original intentions were to use it to cast plastic and resin figures. Her Seven Days (Figure 6,) is from this same mold, but it is cast in plastic and then used to create a mixed media work that includes: concrete, clay, brass fabric, copper, horse hair, and dogwood flowers dipped in plastic resin. The same mold was also used to cast the candles in The Burning of the Feminine (Figure7).

Invisible became a video of small, sand coated ice, sculptural figures melting. I was experimenting to see what would occur as the ice melted. In my original attempts, I only melted the figure. Upon second and third attempts I threw fine coats of sand onto the surface as it melted. A skin formed over the ice. Something exciting happened when the ice completely melted, a shell of what was originally there (the ice figure) remained. I am interested in what was left. The skin, the outer layer, seemed to be what drew my attention; the collapse of the coated form fascinated me.

This work became an investigation into the mortality of the human body and asks questions about the soul that inhabits it. What is left if anything? The outer-shell of dirt will crumble and return to dust. Is there any trace that remains that shows existence really did occur? Like Pompeii, "Life," is here and then it is gone.

This work could just a readily reference the wars and conflicts in our present day. The work harkens to the genocide of millions of individuals who have been erased by hatred. Imagery of the removal of people from the face of the earth has been too common with little left to be seen in the aftermath. The ultimate power of someone to destroy life and remove it from sight is possible. If there is only room for one perspective in political and religious dialogue, genocide can and does occur.



Figure 5

*Invisible*

2011, Ice, Sand. Figure: 8.5" X 3" X 2"





Figure 6

*Her Seven Years*

2011, Concrete, Clay, Brass, Copper, Plastic Resin, Muslin, Cicada, Dogwood Flowers, 12.5" X  
8" X 4.5"

## CHAPTER 10

### CASTING SHADOWS

There is always an element of uncertainty in the outcome of a work. I am often taken with how the work reveals itself outside of my control. In this chapter, I discuss a piece that transforms itself in both physical and conceptual ways.

In one piece of work, The Burning of the Feminine, (Figure 7) I inverted female torsos and cast them as candles. The wick was placed coming out of the figure through the vagina. This piece harkens back to the Carolee Schneemann work, Interior Scroll, in that it defines being a woman in feminine terms. She stated about her work, “I thought of the vagina in many ways—physically, conceptually: as a sculptural form, the architectural referent, the source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation” (Arnason, 598). Her defiance confronted the “male” dominated art world. By using her feminine voice, she opened new doors for women to explore their passions in the realm of art that had previously been off limits to women.

The Burning of the Feminine hung suspended in an ascending line above baths of water. The female bust of wax supported surfaces that were altered and painted with encaustic waxes. Each looked as if it was from a different geographical location.

To suspend the form, I inserted small copper tubing and stainless steel wire in the wax at four points to maintain balance. Wires were attached within the tubing around the upper abdominal area as well as in the back. In the mind of some viewers, the forms looked like they were hooked up to electrodes.

Aesthetically speaking, the arms are not present because I believe they would have been too cumbersome on the elegant torso form. The female as “victim” was assigned to the piece by a few viewers. Others saw the work as transformative. I try to address both points of view.

I address the negative connotations here. Recently, the international news has reported a gang rape and murder of a young woman in India that occurred on a public bus. Her friend was horribly beaten but he survived. The rape was so brutal and has brought to light the rapes of

thousands of women that go under-investigated, if investigated at all. In some cases, “honor killings,” of the victim are carried out to save the families from the shame and stigma that accompanies the violation. An outcry for justice and the protection of Indian women in the judicial and public sectors sparked protests in the streets as people demanded justice for this case and many others (Mahr).

The 2012 election cycle in the U.S. also revealed that some issues about women and their bodies remain in question. The dreaded abortion debate rages on but without meaningful dialogue. I think the argument is flawed in that it is based on profound misunderstandings. A woman’s gender presents some very complex situations that are foreign to the understanding of men. That does not mean men cannot establish a learned perception and/or respect. Rather, it means it is not an experience that men can intimately know. Just like, I cannot really “know”, what it means to be African American. I am Caucasian and I do not know what it is to be judged by the darkness or lightness of my skin.

Seemingly, educated people made comments like Senator Nominee, Todd Akin. He said, when defending his views on abortion that, “If it’s a legitimate rape, the female has ways to try to shut that whole thing down” (Weisman). While Richard Murdock, Senate nominee for Indiana stated his insight into God’s will. “I think even when life begins in that horrible situation of rape, that it is something God intended to happen” (McAuliff). The complex and heated debate over females’ bodies and their health also perplexes some women. Nevada’s U.S. Senate Seat nominee, Sharron Angle, said she would advise a young incest victim impregnated by her father that “two wrongs don’t make a right.” Make a “lemon situation into lemonade.”( Stein) Depending on which side of the fence you stand, you take these statements very differently. We can only see what is on the surface, but we understand that the ideas are based on something internal.

People are fearful about both sides of the issue. A significant part of this argument involves “messy situations,” that do not fit easily into our notion of wrong and right. Being a human being is multifaceted and confusing. What happens when we discuss these issues? Often the conversation shuts down immediately or gets so impassioned that tempers flare uncontrollably. We cannot simply disagree, we have to make moral judgments and call each

other names. Perhaps there are things we cannot resolve. Where does that leave the voice of art? I hope it leaves it in the place that is reflective, and not censored.

Is The Burning of the Feminine about violence toward women or the power a woman has to bring life into the world? It depends on the viewer's point of reference. Being a woman, I can think about and understand empowerment, objectification, and violation. These things are learned early in the life of girls. The conversation we have needs to be inclusive of all these thoughts but much is still missing from our discussions about women's issues and rights.

It is true that no one is safe from discrimination or persecution as long as religion and political ideologies are used to rationalize behavior. How and why people are demonized are important topics in this work. If you look to other much older societies, the way individuals are treated is in constant flux. It is not a given conclusion that anyone's rights to human dignity or existence, in any country, are forever safe. In the reality of this fast changing world, we are only as free as someone with more power says we are free. The starkness of what it is to have potential freedom is a struggle, a very real struggle, not just a philosophical one.

I was interested in the ideas of the burning vagina as a symbol that represents what I have contemplated in my years as a woman. This imagery is meant to bring light to the complexities of what it means to be a woman. A woman, like anyone else, wants independence and the right to think for herself. Women want equal opportunity to live in freedom over their own bodies, in their own homes, communities, and nations.

There is a light that emanates from our feminine ability to bring forth life whether that is creatively or in the bearing and rearing of children. The vessel of what it means to be a woman is one of power and vulnerability. Burning becomes a symbolic representation of both. Light casts shadows as it pierces the darkness. Perhaps people should not fear the shadows, rather each should expect the shadows to flicker and embrace the dance that is life.

As stated earlier, sometimes work reveals itself in time. The burning of the female candles began to create vessels out of the inverted bodies. As the wax melted, something beautiful happened. The form became somewhat translucent and began to hollow out. This metaphor of "vessel," began to discuss what I have been striving to do in the work all along. Look at the interior as a sacred place deserving of respect. The human form became more than

what was represented by its exterior. It became a powerful image that comments on life at a level of transcendence and metamorphosis.

In the end, I was pleased with what the work revealed to me. It was read by a diverse audience and initiated conversations about issues concerning women. Light reveals. Sometimes there is enough light to show us our potential and conceivably the potential of others.



Figure 7

*The Burning of the Feminine*

2012, Cast Candle and Bees Wax, 8" H X 2.5"W X 2" D

## CHAPTER 11

### PAIN

My work has often exhibited the remnants of pain, not because I find it pleasant, but because I find it undeniable. It is a part of all existence. How we deal with it and how we define it becomes critical to our psychological well-being. The counterpoint to that is our ability to feel what others must feel. I think empathy is what defines us as human.

Working with documentation, video seemed to be the next thing to explore. I began thinking about how video is currently being used. Phones are equipped with video technology. Parents film the little league baseball game to show grandparents. People in war torn countries are filming atrocities to hold those in power accountable. These images of real time accounts show what is occurring in our day-to-day existence. We are aware of things never imaginable because technology provides a way to do so.

Chris Burden's work from the 1970s is often classified as crude and immensely intense. What was important was that he used what was newly available to create work that addressed the culture he lived in. According to the Gagosian Gallery website,

Burden's first mature works were characterized by the idea that the truly important, viable work of the future would not be with objects; Instead art would be ephemeral and address political, social, environmental and technological change. (Chris Burden)

The rawness of his art, as well as his ideas about work, influenced some of my ideas in making my video. The subject matter of him writhing across the broken glass in his piece, TV Ad, Through the Night Softly is not one of beauty but of intensity. The performance, which showed him breathing in water, Velvet Water, both stunned me and made me question the reality of the work. What did I believe and why would I believe it? Some of Burden's work makes a social comment regarding the public's hunger for violent acts. The work asks the audience to analyze what they take into their minds. The visual instrument of video could be used as propaganda or informative communication. The social comment that Burden makes in his early

work challenged me to think, not about beauty but content. It makes me, as an artist, think about why I do what I do.

Just as events in the seventies led Burden to make social comments, I too have wanted to voice certain things about society and community. Within the framework of a small rural county, there lie things that are both desirable and not so desirable. The existence of racism and homophobia are two of the least favorable aspects of living in a small town in the south. I discuss these issues with my children. I point out things I know are wrong and try to help them see with clearer eyes than my generation grew up looking through.

My desire to speak out led me to produce the video Silent. (Figure 8) I filmed myself as I tried to sew my lips together with a sewing needle and thread. I wanted to use video to explore the edges of actual visual pain while showing that silence was both the cause and the effect of it. As an artist, I think it would be an oversight not to explore the possibilities of video as a medium. Since I like working quickly to capture the essence of an idea and then editing out what is unnecessary, video was appropriate.

Though my actions showed a type of piercing that happens in order to embellish the body, the video was shot in a way to remove that notion entirely. The image is visceral in that it manages to place pain within the viewer's thoughts immediately. The needle was not a surgical one and forced me to struggle with getting it through my lips. The framing of my face and the difficulty of pushing through the needle produced the desired effect.

Some have commented on the grotesque quality of the work, which is a valid critique. My response is that I am captivated by images, the sublime and the horrific. I think these two live within the same realm, in fact, I feel they rely on one another.

Religious iconography often combines the two quite successfully. Surprisingly, people don't discuss how shocking the religious images are within the church. I remember someone showing my two-year old son a picture of the crucified Christ and was horrified that this seemed appropriate to the person. Who shows a very young child this type of violent imagery? Because it was religious in nature, the person did not see the anguish it caused me or my son.



The Isenheim Altar Piece by Gruenwald is one that comes to mind when I think about contextual appropriateness of something grotesque. Christ's body is horribly disfigured by "the sins of the world." His contorted and skin diseased body is repulsive. It is this vile quality that compels the viewer toward a contemplative awareness of his suffering. The artwork was created for the Monastery of St. Anthony in Isenheim. The monks ran a hospital for those afflicted by plagues. Gruenwald places Christ in the lowliest imaginable state to reassure patients that their wounds would be healed in the life to come if not in the present (Meisler). This then makes the placement in the monastery's hospital brilliantly appropriate.

The presentation of Silent became crucial to its reading and appropriateness. I did not want the powerful imagery to become overwhelming for the sake of shock. It seemed the most successful way to present Silent was to have people view it through the pop-out screen on the side of a hand-held video recorder. To accompany the camera, still photographs from the video are hung on the wall. The horizontal photographic stills are hung vertically with thread and pins. Because the images are hung in this fashion, they do not register to the mind's eye easily. Only persistent viewing yields understandable reading of what is happening in the photographs. The mid-point designated with pins and thread only was where I placed the camera. The short film was looped over and over. Some viewers stopped to watch while others walked past it thinking that documentation was being filmed of the exhibit.

The imagery comes from many references and again has many connotations. In war, there have been reports of captors who have sewn together the lips of their prisoners. Wikileaks released an image on July 22, 2008. (U.S. Detainee's) The image showed an alleged detainee's lips sewn shut. The captive or protestor, as described by some, had his lips sewn together and wires inserted through his cheeks.

Prisoners too have sewn their lips together in protests. The most recent account of this is the more than 1,300 Kyrgyz prisoners. The living conditions are so poor that the prisoners have sewn their lips together to bring attention to their hunger strike (BBC).

Metaphorically speaking, we have all sewn our lips together to be polite. We do not speak out against something we know is wrong. Societies have allowed abuse to continue against

those who are innocent. People stay in dangerous relationships and remain silent about the obvious. Children are sexually abused by priests, and the Catholic Church looks the other way.

The work is ultimately an attempt to examine a silence that is somehow psychologically constructed in a way to make us accept it. To be silent is easier in the beginning than in the end. Some break free from it, others do not. Silence is often a symptom of overwhelming helplessness and its consequences are universally felt.



Figure 8

Stills from Video, *Silent*

2012

## CHAPTER 12

### OBSCURE

”In the normal functioning of visible bodies, skin separates whatever is visible from the parts of ourselves that are hidden.”(Elkins 42)

The outer covering is not our soul identity. As it ages, our skin begins to bear witness to those things that shape us, even if superficially. Experience and disease weather the reality of our existence onto the surface of our being. The skin of the body is frail yet resilient in its ability to shield us. It is not impermeable and allows things to move in and out of our bodies. This, our largest organ, is an amazing membrane that protects us from harmful germs and bacteria but allows crucial vitamins and nutrients to nourish us.

Skin grows with us and stretches, but it does not shrink. As I age, I find that the wrinkles I was intrigued with on older, wiser people do not seem to be as fitting on me. As the skin ages it loses its turgor: ability to stretch and immediately return to its original normal state. In other words it loses its elasticity as is defined here:

[tur'gər]

Etymology: L, turgere, to be swollen

The expected resiliency of the skin caused by the outward pressure of the cells and interstitial fluid. Dehydration results in decreased skin turgor, manifested by lax skin that, when grasped and raised between two fingers, slowly returns to a position level with the adjacent tissue. Marked edema or ascites results in increased turgor manifested by smooth, taut, shiny skin that cannot be grasped and raised. Elderly people normally do not have “good” skin turgor because of a lack of skin elasticity, an expected part of aging. An evaluation of the skin turgor is an essential part of physical assessment (Turgor).

I have been a witness of this loss with my own eyes in the privacy of my bathroom. Never have I been a raving beauty, nor did it seem too important. But, aging brings about great

humility in the mirror. What used to be here has now moved there. It bulges funnily over bones and sinks in around certain sockets.

The thought for Obscure, (Figure 9) came to mind: What if I dealt with this natural process by accelerating it? What if I covered my face with a membrane of tissue to represent the changing landscape of the aging face? Video would be the perfect way to experiment with the idea. I set the camera in close proximity to my face and proceeded to layer on toilet tissue, dipped in water, onto my face.

I sketched my ideas with the video camera and edited it into a piece that could be projected into a bath of water or reflecting pool on the floor. It seemed an appropriate way to contemplate what the visual parts of aging meant. It could also easily reference, in part, the mythology of the Greek god Narcissus and turn it around. What vanity lies within us? Does it cause us to waste our youth before we are able to view the importance of more valuable things? Is it about a fear of our limited mortality?

A friend of mine when she reached 85 declared, "...getting old is hell." I do not think she was referring so much to her outward appearance. It didn't seem she cared about such things at the moment she made the comment. She was past that, and more concerned with the serious matters at hand. She was facing the issues that were robbing her of independence. Her mobility and lapses in memory were rendering her helpless. She knew it and it made her angry and afraid because she was not in control of it.

Reflecting on these issues of aging is not something that we contemplate seriously, until it is our reflection we see. When viewing Obscure, (Figure 9) one witnesses the process that completely envelopes my face. In the beginning the video appears to be revealing the more superficial aspects of aging. It looks like something that might happen in a plastic surgeon's office with bandages. As the video progresses, the membrane becomes disturbing and eventually inhibits my ability to breathe freely. Captured in slow motion, it shows my struggle to inhale.

Watching people age in my life has been difficult. People whom I respect and admire struggle with the most mundane tasks in daily life. This includes tying shoes and going to the bathroom. It is a natural part of a longer life cycle that repeats itself in a cruel way. Does society need to consider laws that enable people to select a dignified end? The question becomes

important to those who care for and endure the difficulties of living immobilized and dependent. Societies debate life and its quality, Should art do anything less?

In the end of the video, Obscure, I rip off the layers of tissue to reveal my present reality. I gasp for air. It seems like I am waking up from a horrifying thought. I feel that the power of the video lies in the concept of the complex fear that we face in our aging selves. The obsession I have about layers of meaning continue to play out in this work. Obscure is a work about personal uncertainty, I do not like to think about.



Figure 9

Stills from Video, *Obscure*

2012

## CHAPTER 13

### WHY DO YOU SAY KNOWLEDGE IS EVIL?

“...You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it or you will die.”

Genesis 3: 3 (NIV)

You Must Not (Figure 10,) is my first completed clay animation. My thoughts in this piece lie in the creation story of Genesis. The thought of Eve being created to be a helpmate spurred my ideas. The curse that followed Eve's desire for knowledge just added fuel to the fire. I think this of all stories in the Bible, is the most damaging to the status of women around the world and within the church. I think of myself as a practicing agnostic who happens to teach her daughter's 4 year old class in a Baptist Church. I was abhorred when I read that the church was still teaching about Eve being created as a “helpmate” to serve man. I blurted my opinion out in front of other parents and the preacher. My minister just laughed and said I'd be going to hell.

Speaking with ministers who broach this topic in a Sunday sermon you will hear various things. By some more liberal leaning theologians it is considered a Jewish creation myth – A story to explain something that is unknowable. It was written in a day and within a culture that did not value women as equals. The problem arises because of how the entire myth in Genesis depicts women. But why would we teach this to our children...to our daughters? Your sole reason for existing is to serve a man and procreate; as well as, adding that your search for knowledge is evil. This line of thought has been used as a tool by extremists in every Abrahamic based religion to hold power over women.

The clay animation became an involved process of creating a moveable sculpture of Eve rendered out of oil based clay. Aluminum wires were inserted into the arms so that they would not fall off and would hold their positioning better. After much deliberation, I built a stage of glass so that Eve could move on a reflective surface. Her torso traveled over the glass while her legs were on the underneath side which would go in and out of view through the filming. I used stop-motion techniques to capture the images on a digital camera. I slightly moved her pose and

took shots with the camera in a successive way until the entire sequence of her movement was recorded on still photos. After shooting multiple story lines of thought, I struggled with how the animation looked. I didn't like the aesthetic feel of the work. It was clunky. I decided on a filter that transformed the sculptural work into a drawing. I explored the idea as if it were dream imagery and edited the film so that in the opening it felt like a choppy reel to reel transition. I manipulated the color of the images from black and white to color and back to black and white. I was pleased with those decisions. I edited it down to 53 seconds which seems to work if looped. I did not originally want to use video footage of my face in the final version but decided it was needed if this was to become a dream like sequence.

The learning curve for this technique was excruciatingly painful. I enjoyed the building of the set and the manual manipulation of making a moveable clay sculpture. The photography and even the *Photoshop* renderings were enjoyable. The difficult transition for me was to plug my visual ideas into a machine that did not understand my native language, nor I its. The photos were entered into the computer *Adobe* program of *Photoshop* to be edited. After the first phase of editing the multitude of images, I placed the altered images into the program *I-Movie* and played with time, sequencing, and sound editing. This is the first time I have ever incorporated extensive narrative or speaking in a work. I found it exciting. Sound added an entire layer of meaning to the piece. I wasn't expecting the spoken words to be so powerful.

I have been pleased that many women related to the distress posed in the video. Of those women, all had grown up with the same creation myth. In the discussions after the video we recognized the negative impact of such teachings about our gender. It seems in certain cases that it had affected sexual relationships and identity as well as the woman's role in marital relationships. Each had to work through the effects of the teaching over time. Some commented on how it still lies within their personal psyche. I am looking forward in the future to a more diverse audience viewing.





Figure 10

*You Must Not*, 2012

Process Photos from Animation

## CHAPTER 14

### FRAGILITY AND TRANCENDANCE

All of the previous art works have tied into the concepts and ideas that shape the ideas presented in the installation presented for my thesis show. I thought it was important to chronicle the steps that brought me to this particular moment.

In the installation, A House Not of Our Choosing, (Figure 11) I was interested in conveying the absolute fragility of the human figure. My intent was to draw people into the space of the gallery by offering a provocative setting and other-worldly figures that floated within the space. The purpose of the installation was to urge viewers to make a closer examination of both the interior and exterior of the work, as well as the environmental changes taking place within the gallery space.

The essence of the figures reminds me of the body cast I viewed as child at the Pompeii exhibit. They are imperfect and ragged around the edges. Yet, there is elegance and a grace to each pose. The figures present themselves like the Nataraja Siva, they hang suspended in a moment as if caught in a type of dance.

Projected slides cast abstracted images across the torn bodies and in turn the figures cast shadows on the gallery environment. Furthermore, the viewers became part of the scene as light cascaded over their interaction with the work. Therefore, the figures and the audience became a diverse community sharing the same space. The sculpture inhabited a context that changed as the imagery from the projectors progressed through its sequence of slides.

The images that undulated over and through the open figures were produced with slide projectors and glass slides that the art department was discarding. There were three distinct groupings of figures within the installation. Each set was projected upon by a different self-timed slide projector. Each slide projector showed three distinct types of imagery that were produced by using actual and photographed anatomical descriptions of the body.

I composed each slide within the three projectors. One group was obliterated self-portraits from the stills of Obscure and of microscopic studies of skin. (Figure 12) These studies were from both animals and humans. The medical images showed tissue that had been affected by disease or injury. Some slides showed healthy tissue but were painted and etched over to symbolize the ever-changing nature of skin. Our skin ages and becomes scared through exposure to the natural elements and the lives we live. The projection overlaid imperfect bodies and distorted the forms. At times, the bodies appeared to be floating in a water-like environment or an embryotic fluid.

The next set of slides was made by manipulating and placing actual human hair between the glass inserts (Figure 13). I used hair from my body as well as hair collected from a local hairdresser near the gallery. The salon served a predominately African America clientele. It was chosen because I wanted to use different hair types from different ethnic origins. Some hair had been colored, some straightened, and some like mine was naturally gray. The linear quality of the hair led to imagery that looked like beautifully rendered lines. The lines danced across the figures in black and white.

The last set of slides was created by drawing out my venous blood (Figure 14). I painted each slide as if I were manipulating watercolor paints. I layered some washes and dropped alcohol on others to create a sense of cellular laboratory studies. The alcohol cut through and pushed out the edges of the minerals in my blood. I used a heat gun to dry the blood and at some points to burn the blood. This changed the saturation of the color and moved the hues from blood red to orange and gray, even to black. What resulted was a richness that felt representative of both rock formations and laboratory medical slides.

Before creating the imagery used in the projections, I had to decide how to proceed with making large scale hollow paper sculptures. Eventually, the pieces were sculpted over clay forms. The paper was pulled *off*, instead of *out* of a mold. (Figures 15) This produced a more textural surface which was far less refined than paper pulled out of molds. Because I wanted each figure to be unique, multiple clay figures were built. Each was manipulated and covered with paper to create new original paper sculptures. Thin layers of toilet paper were carefully laid over the form and coated with special glue used in textiles. *Paverpol* seems to have similar qualities to *Elmer's Glue* and I may revert to the *Elmer's* in the future, simply because of

expense. Pieces were repaired after they were removed from the molded clay sculpture. (Figure 16)

The process was multi-faceted and took months to complete. First, I created an oil-based clay original over a styrofoam core in order to cast a plaster mold. Then I pressed water-based clay into the molds to make the parts of the body. Making the mold facilitated a means of making multiple clay sculptures quickly. I manipulated each part to create a different pose and body type. It became necessary at times to cast individual parts rather than the whole so that I could better sculpt the form in paper.

As a work of art it symbolized the deterioration of all living things. From the beginning deterioration is a part of existence. To embrace it, pays homage to the delicate balance of life. The paper figures represented a process that acknowledges decline, and yet, allowed for a feeling of transcendence. The use of paper in these works was deliberate. I wanted a material that mimicked skin and also that was impermanent. Thin paper seemed to be the appropriate material. I felt the paper's appearance defined the mortal, imperfect body. As I pulled the skin-like paper off the form it felt right to allow the paper to distort. The paper pulled a film of clay off the forms so within each work there is a residue of earth, a remnant of our past.

During my undergraduate work at the University of North Texas, I was introduced to the textile sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz. She is a Polish artist who was born near Warsaw in 1930. Her work has always been representative of the natural world and the body (Magdalena Abakanowicz). Her choice of impermanent materials emphasizes the delicate balance of living.

Abakanowicz has commented at one point that:

To make something more durable than myself would add to the imperishable rubble heaps of human ambitions, crowding the environment. If my thoughts and imagining, just as I will, turn to earth, so will the forms that I create and this is good. There is little room (Stiles, Selz 258).

I appreciate both the concern and the concept that leads her to make the majority of her work from natural materials that will eventually deteriorate.

A House Not of Our Choosing presented raw figures where there was no striving toward a perfection of a smooth surface to replicate flawless seams. I embraced the stretching, tearing and deformation of the paper. It seemed poetic in its representation of the frail body. Process became the guide to see what the paper could do, what it could achieve.

The quality of the installation seemed quieter than most of my previous art works. It was my attempt to pay my respect and gratitude to the body that allows each of us the opportunity to enjoy the existence we have come to know. In the same breath, though, it recognizes the suffering of that existence. Some experience the suffering in more visceral ways than others and they do so because of the bodies and circumstances they are born into. I wanted to address the disparities of those circumstances.

The fact that we are judged and treated in certain ways because of our appearance or status is an important reason to remain diligent with the voice we are given as artists. Much of what happens to us in this life is because of those things that are put on us by others. For this reason the projector became a powerful symbol in the installation. Its imagery visually defined the figure differently with each progression of the slides. The literal “projections,” represented what has been “projected,” on us by our society, our health and or our age. This process can be either positive or negative in nature. There are many random as well as intentional variations. Nutrition and disease mandate the physical effects on the body and mind. People influence the possibilities and paths we follow. Some people pose a threat to us and wield power over us to cause both fear and harm. Others encourage and facilitate our success. Each event and circumstance touches us and forms us in some profound way.

This is not to say that we are merely those things that are projected upon us. Rather it is to acknowledge those things and move beyond them. We are formed and we in turn refine that form to the best of our ability. We exist within the limits of the society we live in but hopefully transcend that which tries to confine us to the house in which we are born.

I was most interested in the response of my audience to the physical imagery, sculpture, and environment. Two individuals from the music department assisted me with interpreting the show through sound. A student Jessica Allison and Dr. Heather Killmeyer played improvisational oboe during the opening. The quality of the oboe created a both haunting and

beautiful interpretation of the work through sound. Those who experienced the live music commented on the effect the music had on their interpretation of the physical work.

Viewers were drawn to specific places in the installation, but not all were able to articulate why certain imagery or sculpture drew them in. It was interesting to note that some were drawn to the projected imagery and shadows while others were fascinated with the sculpture. Painters gravitated toward the cast wall images on a whole, while sculptors were intrigued with the forms. Some vacillated between the two. In a conversation with a mother and daughter, it was interesting to hear that they were moved by different works. The daughter commented on the grouping of figures that used the projected hairs to create the lines on the surface. She was uncertain of the how the imagery was created, yet she was a hair stylist. While the mother's interest was different, she specifically focused on the works that used the projected blood imagery. She too did not realize what the surface imagery was created from. She had a background in medical laboratory work. The familiar in an unfamiliar setting seemed to be part of what pulled viewers to specific works.

I am always more excited about the response of the viewers than in the intensions of the original thoughts that birthed the works. Michael Ray Charles, a prominent artist living in the Houston area, commented on the imagery that floated on the back wall. His work is completely focused on what it means to be an African American man living in a society that wants to gloss over the past and say that the present is changed. He is not shy in his straightforward approach to getting people to acknowledge the ugly past and the ugly present as it pertains to the "other," in our society. His comments about the figure shadows were just as bold as is his art work. He saw lynching immediately. It is an element that is definitely present. It is an undeniable image. It is a terrible fact that "my kind," tried to cause great harm to "his kind," in ways that are painful to discuss. Today the system is still stacked against "the other." People of color are more often charged, incarcerated, and placed on death row than are those of non-color. This installation is about that "house" and many others. "The Other," in all civilizations has been mistreated by those in power. It is indeed a conversation that needs to continue on all levels and in all venues. How we discuss it will define who we become.



Figure 11

Installation: *A House Not of Our Choosing*

2013, Cast and Sculpted Paper, Projected Drawings



Figure 12

Detail: *A House Not of Our Choosing*

2013, Cast and Sculpted Paper, Projected Skin and Etching





Figure 13

*A House Not of Our Choosing*

Detail: Hair Projection



Figure 14

*A House Not of Our Choosing*

Detail: Blood Projection



Figure 15

Process Detail: Working with Paper



Figure 16

*A House Not of Our Choosing*, 2013

Process Detail: Pulling Paper and Repair

## CHAPTER 15

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

“...creativity does not happen inside people’s heads, but in the interaction between a person’s thoughts and a sociocultural context. It is a systemic rather than an individual phenomenon.”

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (23)

The magic that one hopes for is the connection. The connection of the artist’s *thought* to an audience that will contemplate the existence of that *thought* is the defining mark. It is all interconnected.

I believe that good work has the power to make us aware, not save us, but challenge us to look beyond the surface. It offers us the opportunity to explore our understanding of the world, to find ourselves hollow so that we can fill ourselves up with ideas that will transform us. Reaching for a dialogue with my audience is the basis for the work I have presented and have tried to defend it with knowledgeable research.

The work acknowledges the differences that often segregate individuals. It celebrates the diversities but asks us to examine what we fear in each other and ourselves. What appears to be true on the surface of the work changes throughout the time it is viewed. The defining elements of the surface or “skin,” form a shell. It becomes a metaphorical “house” that protects the essence of the figure. The outer layer ultimately requests the viewer to look at a more intimate understanding of the interior, the core of the figure...the thoughts of the soul. Read in different light and by different eyes it offers a time for personal reflection. Ultimately, I want people walk away with a potential for examination.

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