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Dissecting Emotion

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Table of Contents

Artist Statement	iii
Introduction.....	1
Aesthetics	2
Influences	4
Mixed Media.....	6
Sculpture	9
Conclusion	12
Bibliography	13
Appendix.....	14
List of images.....	14
Images	15
Resume	23

Artist Statement

In art I focus on the connection between our anatomical makeup and the inner workings of the mind. It has been a journey to personally bridge the gap between the two and to make sense of the overlapping functions. I use anatomical imagery to explore concepts of transformation and social interaction, and the emotions that are tied to these ideas.

My body of work consists of mixed media and sculptural pieces. I make use of found objects such as vinyl records, rotary phones, and old black and white photographs. These items are considered to be outdated by modern standards but once had purpose and stories attached to them, as people do. Using bright color schemes as well as altering these outdated objects is an experimental and playful approach I take to my art making. While integrating a variety of materials, I juxtapose objects and anatomical imagery to form my narratives on identity.

Dissecting Emotion

Introduction

At an early age, art making was an opportunity for me to feel comfortable in my own skin. Verbalizing my feelings and opinions was a constant struggle. Unless I knew you well, a conversation was a rarity. Since I held the title of extreme introvert, the act of creating became my voice when the words refused to come. It was through my art that I was able to let go and let the layers of my true self show.

The idea of helping others experience art, in the comforting and meaningful way that I did as a child, influenced my decision of a career path. At the conclusion of high school, I decided to pursue an Art Education degree at Buffalo State College in New York. I set out to experience every media and process humanly possible. I became excited at the potential of one day sharing all my newly learned techniques and concepts in a classroom of my own. The experience of student teaching further confirmed my desire to hold a career in a classroom setting. It was comfortable and natural, and every day brought something new and exciting. In fact, I was so eager to take my place in the classroom setting that I did something totally out of character. After earning my degree, and because jobs were so scarce in my home town, I moved 500 miles away from everything I knew and loved to begin teaching elementary school in Northern Virginia.

My desire to dig deeper into the conceptual aspect of my art making was the basis for enrolling in Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program. Upon entering the program, I decided to take an experimental approach to my art making. I constantly pushed myself to go out of my comfort

zone with my choice of materials. I wanted to explore media that were unfamiliar and tie them to those that were already in my repertoire. My goal was to improve the technical side of my work, while adding more substance and personal meaning. I decided to explore the concepts of identity and individuality that would be best addressed in a visual context.

I was confident that if I could learn to create more meaningful work, I could help my students to do the same. My hope was to provide a positive outlet for my students and give them the means to visually express their own thoughts, ideas, and values. They are each unique in their own ways. Their art can highlight their individuality and in turn foster acceptance and understanding from their peers. All in all, I wished for them to understand the importance of creating as an expression of their personal voice.

Aesthetics

My artwork serves as a vehicle for exploration into identity and individuality. As human beings, we share similar compositions in terms of vital organs and bone structures. I often question the point in which we are no longer merely the same as everyone else, and develop a distinctive sense of self. In reflecting on this issue, I depict human organs that also have symbolic meanings. The heart, for example, pumps blood throughout our bodies and is essential to our survival, yet it is simultaneously associated with feelings and emotions. The overlapping elements of self and science is a constant source of fascination and inspiration.

My process typically begins with the decision to morph an inanimate object with a part of the human anatomy. This enables me to use objects and certain elements of human anatomy as metaphorical devices. I enjoy piecing together two things based on a possible connection between the function of the organs and the function, or symbolism, of the objects. For example,

in one work, I combined pieces of a rotary phone with imagery of the brain. The spiraled cord of the phone initially reminded me of the folded texture of the brain. I thought about how we have to concentrate and essentially make use of our brains during phone conversations. Due to the fact that I live apart from the majority of my family, the telephone is a key form of communication for me.

In addition to rotary phones, I used other found objects, such as vinyl records. These items are also considered to be outdated by modern standards but once had purpose and stories attached to them. In one piece, I combined a painting of a ribcage with actual vinyl records positioned in the place of internal organs. This combination was meant to signify the indispensable element that music has in my life. This type of assemblage points to aspects of my personal identity.

I also combined a variety of techniques in my work. Paint was often applied in a range of textures to the surfaces that I worked on. These surfaces included canvas, found objects, book pages, wood, clear plastic, and fabric. I also used bright color schemes, such as vibrant green, magenta, and turquoise. I gravitated towards these colors because I felt that they would attract attention. My idea was to apply vibrant colors to obsolete found objects. In doing this, I wanted the viewer to notice the shift from the traditional color schemes of these objects and therefore take a closer look. By repainting and recontextualizing these objects, I took ownership of these items and used them to convey meaning. Another common element in my work was hand stitching with brightly-colored thread. I used stitching as a drawing tool and stitched into my surfaces and around transferred images to enhance features of the work. Just as I combined the imagery with the objects, I combined a variety of media to tell a story.

Influences

Tim Burton (1958-) is a contemporary filmmaker who has influenced my artwork. An introverted Burton was raised in Burbank, California where he grew to feel at odds in his suburban surroundings. His art is commonly rooted in the theme of alienation, through his use of imagination, as a vehicle for escape. He often tells a story of an outsider trying to fit in, in a place unsuitable for his unexpected characteristics. It is this scenario that makes me contemplate the constant pull of society to fit everyone into a particular mold and in doing so, suppressing individuality. Visually, Burton's work is often presented in the form of visual cues which represent specific ideas. He frequently modifies the human form, uses masks on his characters, and develops unique creatures. He also uses lively color palettes to emphasize change and differences.

At its core, his work tackles the subject matter of the transition between childhood and adulthood, a period of transformation. As we grow into adults, responsibility and the weight of the world may become an obstacle for creativity. For example, within his film *The Corpse Bride* (2005), the characters are living a bland life in a color scheme of muted grays and neutral colors. In contrast, the setting of an underworld comes to life with the vivacity of various shades of purple, blue, and green. These choices of palette reflect Burton's view of normalcy as "claustrophobic and suffocating while the topsy-turvy world is colorful and imaginative, and revelatory, and often turns out to be more logical." (Magliozzi, 15)

I have adapted Burton's method of using bright, non-naturalistic color to manipulate meaning in my work. In addition, I alter the original shapes and arrangements of the organs. This approach allowed me to show that I am not referencing the actual function of the organs. For example, in some of the works, I took the anatomically correct image of the heart and

interconnected it with the symbol of a heart. The intention of this combination was to create work that focused and placed emphasis on personal emotion as an essential factor in individuality.

Another artist who I identify with is Kiki Smith (1954-). She is best known for her sculptures and printmaking. Her work tackles the subject matter of death, decay, and mortality. In contrast, she also works with themes of birth and regeneration. To do this, Smith makes use of imagery pertaining to the human body and self-portraiture.

The first time that I encountered her work, I discovered a sculpture depicting a nude figure in the fetal position, entitled *Blood Pool* (1992). Smith uses the body to bring about acceptance and understanding of our physical makeup. For instance, this figure appeared frail with its spinal cord exposed to the world. I remember thinking about how sad this statement was. I couldn't help but consider the frailty of human life. I thought back on this notion and the briefness of existence and wanted to create works highlighting a variety of human experiences. This evolved into creating personal narratives depicting and celebrating my own thoughts and life events.

In addition to her figurative sculpture, Smith has worked with various printmaking techniques also using the human body to communicate her ideas about its vulnerability and strength. Smith views the body as the way in which we experience our surroundings. For example, *How I know I'm here* (1985-2000) is a linoleum cut print showing various internal organs intertwined with images depicting the human senses. Based on the random placement of body parts, she places equal importance on all organs. In other words, despite all of our individual differences, our crucial need for our organs connects us to each other.

Like Smith, my work makes use of the body as a metaphor to address identity. In regards

to printmaking, she stated: “Prints mimic what we are as humans: We are all the same and yet everyone is different. I also think there is a spiritual power in repetition, a devotional quality, like saying rosaries.” (Weitman, 45) This statement reflects my own interests and concerns on the variations of human anatomy found in my mixed media and sculpture. Just as she has used printmaking as a repetitive process, I have used transfer techniques in a similar process of the creation of multiples.

Lastly, the influence of anatomical imagery is the common denominator in my work. After looking through the pages of a 1950s medical text, I concluded that the human body is a beautiful life form. In the diagrams, there were many shapes and textures that were visually intricate and appealing. I decided to alter these images in this book with a variety of colors, textures, and additional images. Giving an aged book a new look with shockingly bright colors and transformed imagery became an expression of my personal creativity. This process enabled me to present my ideas as a unique individual.

The impact of the artists and subject matter that motivate me is quite evident within my artwork. Visually, the anatomical imagery that I find so fascinating has been layered with whimsy, humor, and storytelling. These are some of the methods that my influences make use of in their own art. What resulted was the opportunity to experiment with bright colors, transformed imagery and the incorporation of meaningful items to share personal narratives.

Mixed Media

Approaching mixed media as one of my focus areas gave me the opportunity to experiment with a wide assortment of materials. It also allowed me to incorporate ephemera into my work to tell personal and family narratives based on selected objects. Having the

tendency to save things, I wanted to give meaning to my collection. The materials that I chose to work with, and at times fuse together, were oil and acrylic paint, wood, fabric, book pages, ink, thread, plastic, and found objects.

Internal Machine (Appendix, 1) is a mixed media oil painting on a vinyl record. I initially selected the record as a painting surface because I wanted to give it a new purpose while tying its initial function into the meaning of the work. The process began with an anatomical rendering of the heart on an old 33rpm vinyl record. The heart is bright with blue arteries, and is placed on a contrasting green background. I then added a combination of both painted and actual mechanical gears to the central section of the composition. The gears are meant to symbolize the inner workings of the heart, as well as the rapid progression of technology. It often seems that people have difficulty functioning without high-tech items comparable to their inability to function without internal organs.

With the painting, *Bitter* (Appendix, 2), I wanted to emphasize the symbolism of the heart as an organ of emotion. Here, I addressed the idea of cold-heartedness. To communicate this, I painted the heart an icy blue and manipulated the veins and arteries into dripping icicles. I started by spray painting a piece of wood with a bright green color. This was layered with gloss gel medium and scraped while still wet to create a texture. Standing further back from the work, I sprayed a light blue paint onto the wet gel medium, and a color gradation from blue to green resulted. Then, the icy, dripping heart design was drawn, photocopied, and transferred to the surface with gel medium. Using a mixture of acrylic gloss gel medium and bright blue paint, I layered more icicle shapes in bright white gesso beneath the heart. Lastly, string gel was painted on top of the heart's veins and arteries to create a textural, dripping quality.

In my next piece, I created an altered book titled *Vibrant Recollections* (Appendix, 3 and

3a). In this piece, I used an old medical book published in the 1920s. I chose the book because I was drawn to the abundant anatomical illustrations and photographs that it contained. For this piece, I manipulated the anatomical imagery to represent my personal thoughts and life events as well as my connections and interactions with other people.

Tackling an altered book was an exciting feat. It even felt a bit rebellious considering that during my years of schooling we were discouraged to modify the pages of our books. I quickly got over this notion as I began to divide the book into sections and to gesso pages together. I created sections of varying thicknesses, some of them being made up of as many as eighty pages and others as few as two. Under the weight and wetness of the gesso, the pages and sections began to warp. I took a box cutter to the still wet edges of the pages and scraped away the surface gesso to create interesting and rough textures. Next, I painted the pages in bright colors, followed by creating diverse textures and marks. I then added text and imagery relating to my life and experiences. At this point, it was no longer a book meant to provide medical information. It was a vehicle to tell a story.

To show my sense of humor I often added details to the images. For example, on one page I added a bow tie to a drawing of a skeleton and a nose ring to the diagram of a nose, as seen in the detail (Appendix, 3a). In doing this, I wanted to show that the book was still about human beings but in a more personal and specific way. Much of the imagery includes diagrams of various organs, bodily structures, examples of illnesses, and medical processes. The bright color scheme, presented throughout the piece, was applied to these diagrams and I added personal photographs and found objects. I transferred images of several generations of my family and drew and painted images. Additionally, I fashioned pockets to hold photographs and found objects. There were several ways in which I did this, such as stitching pages together,

gluing small envelopes to the pages, and using a box cutter to cut storage spaces into the book. Three pockets were used to store small 45rpm vinyl records. These records were painted in vibrant colors and personal family imagery was attached. Other pockets held meaningful items, such as found objects that represented my family, an old report card from the early 1900s, a favorite cassette tape, and black and white photographs. The overall piece became a tribute to those important to me.

Through combining and layering materials, my work reached a symbolic level, as well as a technical quality that I desired. In addition, I was able to create surfaces that were visually appealing. Given the opportunity to experiment has energized me and expanded my possibilities for expression.

Sculpture

My sculptures stem from my need to experiment with mixed media. My general goal was to work with found objects, use more challenging materials, and to create an installation. More specifically, I wanted to present symbolic ideas in three-dimensional form. My sculptures share similarities with my mixed media pieces, the difference being they encompass more dimensional space.

In *Misplaced Heartstrings* (Appendix, 4), I started with an old suitcase that I had found at a thrift shop. I wanted to create a tribute to my grandmother and thought of the suitcase as a traveling altar. I had been thinking of the altars that were created in memory of loved ones during the Mexican holiday, the Day of the Dead. What struck me was how positive the Mexican people are when facing death. They want to celebrate life instead of fearing death. They convey this by using bright colors and whimsical décor in their celebrations. I was inspired

by this approach.

In making this piece, I spray painted the suitcase vibrant green on the exterior and faded it to a light blue on the interior. I used sand paper to roughen up the outside of the suitcase to contrast with the story presented on the inside. Next, I created a soft sculpture of a heart. The form was cut out of white cotton, stitched together, and stuffed with cotton. Pink fabric paint was applied to the finished form. I wanted the heart to be soft so the viewer would have a desire to touch it. Personally, it was a reminder of the stuffed animals that my grandparents would give to me as a child. Next, fabric veins and arteries were painted on and cut out of cotton muslin. I attached these to the back of the opened suitcase and extended them out beyond the suitcase's edges. The heart was placed on top of these, as the focal point.

This heart was simultaneously a symbol for love and blood relations. I stitched photographs of three generations of my family to the heart, and added image transfers of both my grandmother and father. Next, I stitched electro-cardiograph lines onto clear plastic. These lines extend from the soft sculpture heart to the photographs of family to show the life that has resulted from my grandmother's own existence.

My next piece was an installation using obsolete floppy discs, which have the potential to be arranged in many ways. *Embedded* (Appendix, 5) is about personal memories and the brain's capability to house these. I wanted to make a connection between this out-of-date storage technology and a function of the human brain. This correlation is signified with an ink drawing of neurons, found on the front of each of the discs. The neurons have been rendered with a range of colors, textures, and shapes to signify how memories vary from person to person.

In addition, this piece allowed me to collaborate with people that have supported me throughout my coursework. I asked family and friends to contribute a personal memory for the

installation. They were given freedom to present the memory however they wished, whether it be text, a drawing, or a photograph. They were allowed to use the back of the disc to record their memory. I compared these personalized memories to the way information was once stored on floppy discs.

The next piece was a book I created out of wood. In *Ours* (Appendix, 6 and 6a), I chose to use imagery of the heart once again. After some training, I gained confidence in using all of the necessary tools to cut, carve, and sand, and found the process to be exhilarating. I was able to take a slab of wood and transform it into something meaningful.

The first step was to create a heart template. The goal was to cut out four separate hearts and hinge them in pairs. Each of the sets needed to be identical. After tracing each of the hearts, I cut them out with a band saw. To keep the shapes exact, I clamped the pairs together and used both a power sander and a dremel tool to even out and match up the edges. After this, I drilled a set of holes in each and attached hinges, so the hearts could open and close like books.

In the next phase of the work, I used a power sander to round off the edges. I then used the dremel to carve out and sculpt the aorta, veins, and arteries on the front of each hinged book. At this point, I used a wood burner to burn the arteries and veins on the front of each of the hearts. I created two separate books to reference each side of my family.

On the interior of each, I mapped out and marked the locations for old family photos. Then, I burned electro-cardiograph lines into the wood to linearly connect the photographs. I finished the wood with few coats of a cherry stain and let it dry. Lastly, I transferred the old photographs onto the interior and layered them with polyurethane to give them a glossy finish and to protect the images. In these wooden books, I was able to represent the connection of the symbolism and function of the heart.

In sculpting, I learned to select the materials that lent themselves to the definitive meaning of a work. This included the strength or fragility of the materials as well as the visual properties and functional qualities. Because of this approach, I was able to mesh the function and symbolism of the anatomical forms with that of the materials to create meaningful narratives.

Conclusion

As a direct result of the MIS-IAR Program, I am better able to visually articulate ideas within my art. I stepped outside my comfort zone and embraced atypical, vibrant, and attention grabbing approaches in my art. I couldn't be more thrilled with the outcome.

This process has also positively affected the way in which I educate my students. I strive to provide a creative learning environment that celebrates individuality and diversity. I also encourage the students to experiment with subject matter in relation to materials. Most importantly, I stress that they have the opportunity to represent the many facets of their lives that are of great personal value.

At this point, I will continue to share my own stories and thoughts, depicting the many layers of my identity. This journey has stripped away most of the fear that I have had of failure. I now know that mistakes are inevitable and it is okay to make changes and alter strategies. My introverted nature will always be a part of my makeup but my art will always be there to help me speak my mind.

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Appendix

List of Figures

- Figure 1. *Internal Machine*, mixed media oil painting on vinyl, 9 ½" x 9 ½" x 4", 2011.
- Figure 2. *Bitter*, mixed media acrylic painting on wood, 14" x 10" x 1", 2011.
- Figure 3. *Vibrant Recollections*, mixed media altered book, 11" x 7" x 4" (closed book), 2010.
- Figure 3a. *Vibrant Recollections* (detail), mixed media altered book, 11" x 7" x 4" (closed book), 2010.
- Figure 4. *Misplaced Heartstrings*, suitcase, paint, and fabric, 22" x 36" x 16", 2010.
- Figure 5. *Embedded*, ink on floppy discs, 4" x 4 x ¼" (each disc), 2013.
- Figure 6. *Ours*, mixed media on wood, 13" x 20" x 3" (each book), 2012.
- Figure 6a. *Ours* (detail), mixed media on wood, 25" x 20" x 1" (opened book), 2012.



Figure 1. *Internal Machine*, mixed media oil painting on vinyl, 9 ½" x 9 ½" x 4", 2011.



Figure 2. *Bitter*, mixed media acrylic painting on wood, 14" x 10" x 1", 2011.



Figure 3. *Vibrant Recollections*, mixed media altered book, 11" x 7" x 4" (closed book), 2010.



Figure 3a. *Vibrant Recollections* (detail), mixed media altered book, 11" x 7" x 4" (closed book), 2010.



Figure 4. *Misplaced Heartstrings*, suitcase, paint, and fabric, 22" x 36" x 16", 2010.



Figure 5. *Embedded*, ink on floppy discs, 4" x 4" x 1/4" (each disc), 2013.



Figure 6. *Ours*, mixed media on wood, 13'' x 20'' x 3'' (each book), 2012.



Figure 6a. *Ours* (detail), mixed media on wood, 25" x 20" x 1" (opened book), 2012.

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Education

- 2013 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
Mixed Media and Sculpture
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Art Education

Teaching Experience

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Buffalo, New York

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Exhibitions

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