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SHIVER

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2008

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Abstract

SHIVER

By Jennifer Carson, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

Major Director: Lydia Thompson
Professor, Craft Material Studies

Dissipating through growth;

Solving within illusion;

Resilience in vulnerability.

Through enveloping strands of tenuous connections, translucent flesh-like layers, and subtle movement through touch, my thesis installation entitled “Shiver” makes reference to the Sublime as it asks the infinite question; *What is the primordial self?*

Prologue

I don't have answers, or even adequate descriptions; only questions, emotions, and thoughts that I have an unquenchable need to address and acknowledge, but am unable to in the midst of the cacophony of everyday life. The reflection upon and recording of my thoughts and questions through writing are in a sense the same as my visual works, but in a different format. Therefore, I feel that my writings and my visual work can feed off of each other and portray a more accurate sense of the motivations behind my work than a literal narrative description alone.

When asking myself why I feel the need to record my thoughts and emotions, to me it seems almost like creating evidence of occurrence. It makes my experiences more real to me. Everything, no matter how miniscule or profound, is drowned out by the constant prolific birthing happening in and around me. Maybe it helps me feel like I know myself. Maybe it gives me something to go back to when I need to remind myself who I've been. Maybe it makes me feel like someone in the future might know me, and maybe even wish they could exist with me. I often find myself wishing I could sit and talk with artists and writers from the past. Perhaps this would kill some of my romanticized characterization of them...but perhaps a part of me wants for someone to create a romanticized character out of me. Memory is fallible, causing everything to be gradually fading from view; decreasing in clarity. If I allow time to simply pass, with no recognition of my thoughts

and experiences, it feels like I am simply letting these parts of myself sink unseen.

Through my art and writing I can attempt to create an imprint resembling my oddly shifting parts as the increasing distances distort them.

I have found that there is an interchange that occurs as I make my work and seek to clarify the driving force behind it. My process of seeking out the questions and motives at the core of what I make involves the shifting interplay between my own personal experience, making, writing, and the expression of others. I often begin making intuitively, using my personal sense of aesthetic, curiosity, desire for experimentation, and usually a vague idea of concept as a guide in material and form. As the work takes shape, I reflect on the thoughts, questions, and feelings within myself that I hope will resonate within the work. I then record these thoughts in my writing. In the midst of trying to translate my work into a form that can be verbalized, I will sometimes come across the writings of someone else whose motives seem to connect with mine in some way. The structure of my Chronology and Thesis reflects this interplay in my process of making. The writing shifts between description/discussion of the work, my journal entries, and excerpts from writers who have influenced me in my pursuit of awareness.

I will begin by briefly discussing the work I've done during my graduate studies at VCU, followed by a more in depth discussion of my thesis installation entitled "Shiver."

Chronology

My work upon arriving at VCU was primarily object based ceramic sculpture with occasional elements of metal, fiber, and wood. These works were isolated and magnified parts of the human body, sometimes fused with architectural or natural elements. I began my studio practice at VCU by magnifying the eye. I completed three pieces in this series. The first piece was entitled, “Who Will Remember?” It is approximately 4 ft. high and 3 ft. wide, and entirely ceramic except for the eyelashes, which are made of wire reaching from one eye to the other; reaching in vain to surpass the inevitable forgetting.



*Others can never comprehend my experience, nor I theirs.
I wonder how many times the same things have to be repeatedly learned from
generation to generation because of this gap in comprehension.
I cannot know;
What I know is distorted by the hours pulsing within me;
Silently gliding beneath my feet.*

*I wish I could grasp time
To pull it out of my pocket when I want for someone to understand me
Or when I want to understand myself.*

My next work was familiar as an eye socket, but also alien and monstrous in size, form, and color. It is mainly ceramic with an oil on canvas painting of mostly submerged rocks on the back of the eye socket. The interior of the lower lid is filled with resin resembling clouded water. The resin both reveals and conceals elements of what is below the surface.



*No one can see me, and I can see no one else
I cannot see me
Can anyone see themselves?
What does the visible say of the submerged; that which is beyond the senses?
How do I know what is blurred if what it means to be clear lies within you...
Beyond my grasp?*

Partially in response to my fascination with experience and the senses, as well as my desire to take a step away from the constraints of working from life with realism, I decided to work blindfolded. I was curious what would result from removing the dominance of my vision in my aesthetic decision-making. Instead, I used the sense of touch and the spontaneous thoughts and emotions I experienced during the process of making as a guide for the form.



In the spring semester of 2007, I was questioning the face in its ability to accurately portray the inner self. I manifested these questions and frustrations by sculpting faces while blindfolded, then drawing lines vaguely resembling letters around the mouths. I felt a distinct connection with this excerpt from Rainer Maria Rilke's poem titled, "The Poet's Death".



“His face was that expanse
Which reaches out to him in vain;
But this timid mask will die
Being openly exposed,
A tender fruit doomed to decay.” (4)

I continued to work with the concept of the inadequacy of the physical self by casting my own face in glass, then suspending it by thin, translucent strands that appeared to be slowly detaching from the wall.



This image of magnified bone marrow was a starting point for my candidacy work:

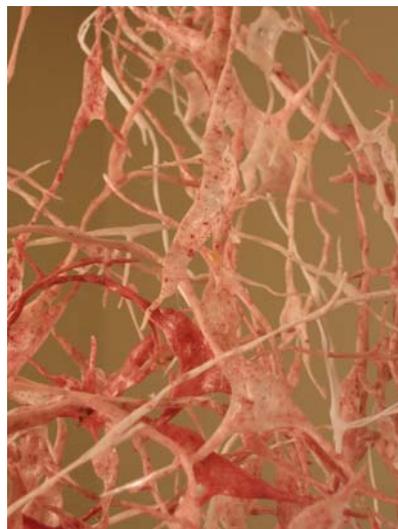
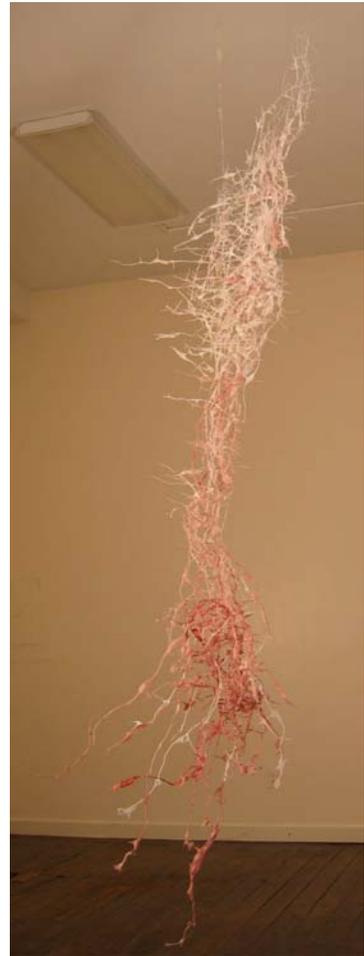


I was intrigued by the delicacy and seeming fragility of the marrow. Its contrast with our dependence on our bones as structural support fascinated me. Originally, I planned to create an eight foot long finger bone scraping itself against the wall. The finger bone would be made up of tiny, delicate interconnected pieces rather than the hard exterior of the bone. As the finger would seem to be scraping itself against the wall in an attempt to leave behind its mark, it would also be wearing away at the delicate structure of itself. The act of living is the act of dying, or as Franz Kafka stated,

“The fact that our task is exactly commensurate with our life gives it the appearance of being infinite.” (3)

Over the course of the semester, the form that this idea would embody shifted several times. By the time of candidacy, it was no longer a finger bone, and had no relation to the wall. The piece was made of hundreds of thin strands of plastic melded together into a form which seemed to be simultaneously living and dying. As it sought to grow outward, it was continuously bound to a single thin strand. In a sense of quiet desperation it seemed to question this source of being. At the end it curled back in toward this strand, its lifeline.

I wanted for this piece to have a life of its own, as it seemed to contemplate,
What is this consciousness which I am?
When will it snap from the weight of my growth which I cannot stop?
Because of it I grow; and I die.



In the Fall of 2007 I was going through an extreme shift in my faith, and therefore my identity. I chose to work with unfired clay for its impermanence and constant state of change, as well as its history in being used as a material for building protective structures. I put the clay over wire on the wall, let it dry and crack, then deconstructed what I had built. The result seemed simultaneously human and architectural, while also resembling an aerial view of a desert landscape.





What is change?

Is it my first doubt?

Is it my internal decision, the change in my actions, or the telling of my change?

There seems to be no moment, only the sums, which are simplified and translated into my own temporary idioms.

Everything is continuously in flux;

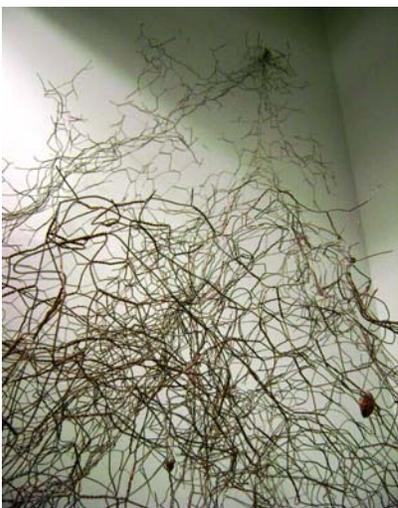
Yet my consciousness forces me to define.

I build walls which I know are already in the process of destruction as I build...

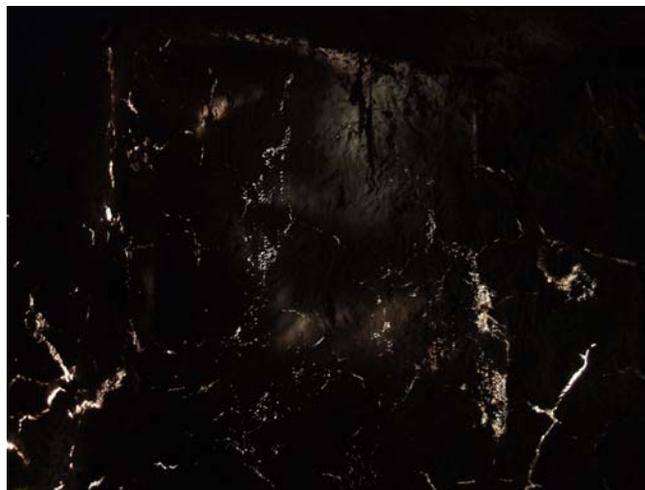
What is my existence without them?

The destruction of my definitions comes from a combination of inevitable outside influence, and deliberate, conscious decisions of self deconstruction. The need to start again is one that never ends.

Several experimental pieces followed, in which I added various materials to the clay such as lace, electrical wire, plastic, tubing, eucalyptus, and orange peels. I also experimented with the distorted wire left from the clay wall pieces after I tore them down.



In an effort to transform the clay wall pieces into a more visceral experience, I made a room out of the unfired clay. The room was intended for one person at a time, with the only light source coming from the exterior through the cracks in the walls.



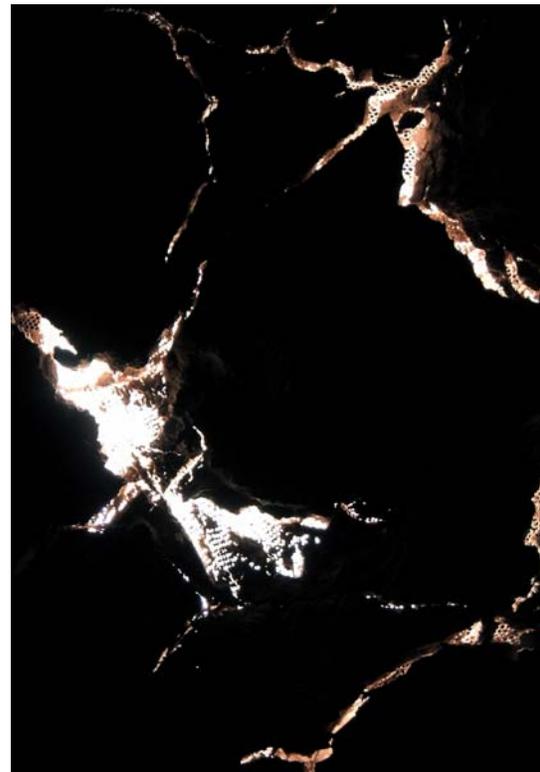
*The concept of the other is foreign, and can only be known in fragments.
Yet I cannot avoid defining myself by what is around me. Therefore the
concept of self is equally fragmented.*

*I only know myself in relation to the shifting light; the inquisition of the
other exposing fragments of my isolated self.*

I cannot be alive and whole.

If there were such a thing, what would it look, sound, taste and feel like?

As I was documenting the room before I tore it down, I began to see the images as more than documentation. The images seemed to be conveying my idea more strongly than the room itself. There was sensuality, mystery, and questioning between the lines and variations in light intensity through the cracks. I was surprised by the relation of the images to my previous work-particularly the plastic piece.



At the beginning of Spring 2008, I decided to go back to the plastic for my thesis work. I am now using a variety of forms and line quality, and combining them to fill the room with layers of interaction within an organized, but simultaneously chaotic pattern. I seek a sense of paradox within the work, both visually and conceptually. The work appears delicate and weightless, but is impenetrable; beautiful, but disturbing, and contains a translucency allowing the viewer to see, but only in part.



Thesis Work

“Shiver”

*I can never see, touch, taste, or hear the whole of its being;
It is new; shocking; awful.
I cannot conceive of its beginning or its end
It makes me nothing.
It doesn't listen;
It is too vast to hear my tiny pulsing.
Why do I want to linger here?
I can only dismiss in this moment where words end.
It is a terror that caresses me as it closes my throat,
and numbs my thoughts.
I need it to tell me I am here.*



*In these moments I invade space, and time pulses within me.
Everything is dependent on everything else to be where it is.
I am irreplaceable.
Time would go on, no better or worse without me;
A simple, commonplace adaptation;
But it would not be the same.*

*If I try to remove my effect,
The miniscule; prodigious act of a single breath
Reverberates anonymously through everything that has been;
Or will ever be.*

I remember being both intimidated and enthralled as a child by the simple experience of standing under a massive tree or a tall tower. I feel a similar sensation when looking at mountains, or swimming over a freshwater spring. It is the experience of something vastly beyond my measure and comprehension; an emotional experience coined by the Romantics as the “Sublime”. I tend to think of this experience in a positive light, but the draw of it goes hand in hand with the draw of terror. Anything new, shocking, and vast gives my senses the indulgence they crave; to be overwhelmed; entranced into escape from the reality they have known. It reminds me I am alive-and that now is all that is mine. It puts me in my place; it calms and enlivens me as it tells me of the futility and insignificance of all my efforts. I can do nothing, I am nothing, but I am here now. I found a close connection in Rainer Maria Rilke’s experience of beauty taken from the Duino Elegies.

“For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror,
which we are still just able to endure,
and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us.
Every angel is terrifying.” (5)



*What if these walls of flesh could fall;
 The myths of freedom made real?
 In this state of complete liberation, would the "I" still exist?
 Where would "I" start and you end?
 Do I want to be free?*

*If I were transparent, I could understand.
 Only then could I honestly become;
 Truly embody the other.
 No longer being the sum of me;
 Judging, deciding, corrupting, invading from the source of myself.*

*If I were opaque, I could know.
 Only then could I exist as a solid whole;
 Unchanging;
 A god?
 No longer shifting; turning into what will be.
 If I desire any fiction long enough,
 With the empty vigor at the core of my being,
 Will it become, or will I?*

*I am shadowed by the other within me.
 It is me,
 Becoming and never being;
 It is my death,
 It is my pulse,
 It is the ringing in my ears;
 The endless hum of my thoughts
 It is a stranger with no name.
 I want to meet it;
 But all that I do is a rejection of it;
 Still it remains and follows.
 Without it what am I?*

In addition to the co-existence of pleasure and terror within the Sublime, I am also interested in the duality within the self. What is my primordial self? Is it my physicality, and nothing more? What would I be without this impassable barrier of my body? Are we the same, or vastly different at our core? I am both inescapably subjective and collective in this state of consciousness. I have always felt a sense of tension within myself, a continual struggle between what I think I know and what I don't know about myself. There is on one hand the side that must continually strive toward goals, seek accomplishments, define, and "make a life for myself". Then there is my primal self, the continually known unknown. Who are you? Who am I? Not yet anyone. Due to our constant state of dying, complete self-relation is impossible. This paradoxical alterity of self is what causes my striving, and yet the full realization of it seems to carry the potential to eliminate desire. In the words of Maurice Blanchot:

"...man has constructed the world, he has put himself to work, he has become a producer, a self-producer. Nonetheless, a strange thing, this is not enough: at every moment he is left as it were with a part of dying that he is unable to invest in activity. Most often he does not know this, he hasn't the time. But should he come to sense this surplus of nothingness, this unemployable vacancy,

should he discover himself to be bound to the movement that causes him, each time a man dies, to die infinitely, should he allow himself to be seized by the infinity of the end, then he must respond to another exigency-no longer that of succeeding but of failing, no longer that of turning out works and speaking usefully but of speaking in vain and reducing himself to worklessness: an exigency whose limit is given in the “interior experience.” (2)

While working, I was also reading “The Last Man”, by Maurice Blanchot, and found there to be many parallels between this work and mine. It is a fictional story, set in a sanatorium, where this “last man” is said to be dying. He has been stripped of all character, specificity, and identity. He is the empty desire, or strangeness within that is the not knowing; the constant becoming and never being; a personification of the metaphysical other within the self. In the first section of the story, the narrator describes his relation to this last man.

“Maybe he is behind each one of us, the person we see when the end comes...but perhaps he is only me, from the very beginning me without me, a relationship I don’t want to embark upon, that I push away and that pushes me away.” (1)

In the second section, the narrator embodies the last man, who speaks of his relationship to the reader.

“I form a doubt about myself greater than what you can tolerate. And who is talking? Is it you? Is it me in you? Is it the murmur that keeps passing between us and whose different echoes reach us from shore to shore? Oh, how you shiver, how you seem to flee before the agitation which I draw you toward...” (1)

When I read this excerpt, it seemed that this shivering Blanchot speaks of is what I seek to evoke in the work. The piece has no solidity, centrality, or core. There is no problem to solve; no final solution to be found, but instead a situation of layers and dissipating masses. The experience of “Shiver” is one of solemn, calming envelopment; a

sensory escape from the distracting cacophony; a reminder of the constant murmur of consciousness. Like the still, cold, silence among trees after the first heavy snowfall of the year. I also seek to stir a subtle sense of terror in its thin, tearing layers and entanglements with no visible core. Like an awareness of being unheard. “Shiver” is overtly fabricated as seen in its lack of color, materiality, and reference to the magnified internal self, released from the body. The work feels at once familiar and foreign; Like the idea of death, or seeing anything under our skin. There is a quiet, cold simplicity and purity in its uniformity of material, color, and masses of repetition, but there is also a disturbing tension and restlessness in its tenuous points of connection, subtle radiating movement enlivened by touch, and enveloping translucency.



Conclusion

Perhaps the sublime could be described as anything that awakens us to this “shivering” which arises from our primal core; the wonderfully terrifying powerlessness; the anxious calm resonating from the seemingly endless, silent hum of the body. Or is it the self? Ironically, it seems the process of seeking a solid, final clarity in the definition of my work actually reflects the source itself. It therefore constantly evades definition and slips from my grasp. An endless question in a shifting answer.





Technical

The material I am using is called, “Friendly Plastic”, because it can be melted and handled without releasing toxins. I melt the plastic in water heated to just under the boiling point, remove a small amount with a wooden stick, and form it as it cools. As it cools, it turns white and hardens in approximately 30 seconds to a minute depending on the thickness of the plastic. I then connect these parts using the tip of a hot glue gun. By placing the heated tip of the glue gun on both parts to be connected, the plastic is softened enough for the two parts to be melded together. I then hold the parts together until the plastic cools and a strong bond is formed. The piece as a whole is supported by a combination of nails and hot glue on the wall, and is hung from fishing line across the ceiling.

Literature Cited

Literature Cited

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4. "Rilke, Rainer Maria 'The Poet's Death', written for 'Symphony No. 14', by Shostakovich." Beethoven Festival Series. The Richmond Symphony. Randolph-Macon College, Richmond VA. January 14th, 2007.
5. Rilke, Rainer Maria. The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. New York, NY: Vintage International, 1989.

VITA

- Exhibitions/Awards:** 2008 MFA Thesis exhibition
Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
- 2008 “Tangents” VCU Graduate student and alumni show
Slaughterhouse Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2008 “Grey Area Stake Out” VCU/Tyler exchange show
Crane Arts Center, Philadelphia, PA
Curated by Ingrid Schaffner
- 2007 “Volume 7” Candidacy Exhibition
Richmond, VA
- 2007 “Niche Awards” Graduate Student Finalist exhibition
Convention Center, Philadelphia, PA
- 2007 “Bathwater” Exhibition
FAB Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University
- 2007 “A Separate Piece” Exhibition
Gallery 5, Richmond VA
- 2006 “Imago Dei” Juried Art Exhibition
2nd place
- 2006 Greenville Museum of Art Annual Juried Art

Exhibition

2006 Raleigh Fine Arts Society twenty-eighth annual Artist's

Exhibition

2005 Overall Outstanding Senior Award: ECU School of Art

2005 Outstanding Senior Award: ECU Ceramics

2005 "Witness" ECU Senior Exhibition:

Burroughs Wellcome Senior Gallery,

East Carolina University

2005 "The Rebel" ECU Juried Student Art competition

3rd Place Ceramics

2005 48th Annual National Juried Art Exhibition

2005 "CCA" 24th Annual Competitive Exhibition

2005 "Illumina" ECU Student Art Competition

2005 East Carolina University Undergraduate Exhibition

Award of Excellence in Ceramics

Award of Excellence in Painting

2004 "Images" Annual Juried art show

2004 East Carolina University Undergraduate Exhibition

2003 East Carolina University Undergraduate Exhibition

Nell Cole Graves Award of Excellence in Ceramics

Hungates Award of Merit in Foundations

Solo: 2004 Wake Eastern Regional Library :

Knightdale, NC Jan. 1-30

Education: East Carolina University BFA completed Fall 2005

GPA at graduation: 3.895

Virginia Commonwealth University MFA to be completed Spring 2008

Teaching Experience: July 2007 Summer Art Camp Instructor for Emerge Gallery

Spring/Summer 2007 Adjunct faculty in Craft/Material Studies

dept. at Virginia Commonwealth University

Fall 2003-Summer 2006: Greenville Recreation and Parks

Department instructor in ceramic sculpture, wheel throwing,
painting, and drawing

Professional Memberships: Fall 2006-Spring 2007 Contemporary Craft Society Vice

President

Fall 2004-Fall 2005: East Carolina University

Ceramics Guild Treasurer