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FINDING MYSELF HERE

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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Richmond, Virginia
2009

Acknowledgements

Thank you everyone who has supported my growth and progress.

Nancy Blum
Sonya Clark
Jason Hackett
Susan Iverson
Natalya Pinchuck
Debbie Quick
Allan Rosenbaum
Stephen Vitiello
Gregory Volk
Jack Wax

A special thank you to *Arthur and Audrey Powers* through whose generosity I was able to see my vision for this exhibition realized.

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Abstract

FINDING MYSELF HERE

By Cari Freno, M.F.A.

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

Major Director: Lydia Thompson
Director of Ceramics

Both the natural and civilized worlds establish a context within which I may understand my own existence. My search for “self” and the emotive qualities of life within these contexts provides the impetus for my work. I create juxtapositions: from found art assemblages to, more recently, intimate experiences in public park environments. Within these curated experiences I challenge myself to open up to unknown experiences derived from my relationship to the landscape and the life forms found within. My videos are a kind of self-surveillance fostering absurdly promiscuous behavior when I am alone, in front of a camera. These conjured “secret acts” appear to exist within a realm of magic, science fiction or spirituality. They are sincere attempts at socialization, which more accurately convey the ineffective, naive and pathetic tenderness of a rookie’s efforts.

From Clay to Tape

I have always found art-making a logical place to explore experience. I came to graduate school ready and open to be immersed in new experience. Once in school, I realized that a reevaluation of my art-making process and product was necessary if I were going to succeed in the pursuit of honestly interpreting and synthesizing my world into a visual medium.

I had a background in ceramics



Figure 2: *Trickle down*. Found objects. 2008.



and **Figure 1: *sorrow is worn out joy*.** Found object, porcelain. 2008.

was accepted into this program with plans to continue exclusively using this medium. In the beginning I was determined to push myself with this medium in new ways. I assumed being in a new and different place would nurture new ways of focusing on experience, emotion, mediation and the human condition in my ceramic work. This graduate program did allow me to do that; however I realized that my work and my goals were being limited by my medium.

My previous body of work furnished a springboard for developing small sculptural ceramic objects using thrown and altered vessels. This work referenced the integration of industrial or man-made forms with organic or nature-derived forms. Soon I began to incorporate found objects into my work.

Like a sociologist gathering artifacts, I collected old knick-knacks, children's toys, outdated, functional kitchen supplies and strange old tools or objects. These mid 20th century objects were domestic and blue collar in nature. In the construction of assemblage works I was searching for myself, by trying to take cues from the working-class, Midwestern culture in which I was raised. This process of thinking helped foster an understanding of who I was in the present. All of these objects were from thrift stores or garage sales and were imbued with time, memory, family and stories. As I assembled the found objects with ceramic parts, it occurred to me that the objects became more important

than the clay parts because of their history, which, I felt made them more human, more me.

During my first year I made work using my personal history as a lens through which to investigate the complex and massive dynamic of civilization and nature. Through this research I discovered that I needed to physically exist within my work.

In my first winter of graduate school I continued making objects and began making casts of my body as well. I made molds of my legs and cast porcelain replicas. I used the legs as a symbol of insecurity and fragility paired with the extreme opposite, a boxer. I fired the porcelain to cone 5 (2185°F) causing the



Figure 3: *You are a Fighter*. Vinyl, porcelain, boxing gloves, polyester. 2008

legs to shrink. The result was a pair of fragile and scrawny-looking woman's legs. I found a compelling dynamic in the pairing of boxing gloves and casts of my legs. They both were strong and fragile at the same time but for different reasons. The gloves were symbolically powerful while the legs exhibited the definition of muscle strength. The gloves, materially speaking, were feeble and powerless without hands in them and the porcelain, though fired, was delicate to handle.

For my candidacy exhibition I created four three-quarter sized figurative sculptures. I juxtaposed a soft, digitally printed, pillow version of boxer Muhammad Ali with hard porcelain casts of my legs. These pieces evoked my frenzied psyche at the time. My feelings were a mix of fragility, competitiveness, sensitivity, unaffectedness, boldness, greatness, insecurity and confidence. The *Self Portrait as Muhammad Ali* series was different from past work, not only in scale, but also in content. They represented specific sides of the fickle nature of personality, specifically, my personality. All of these "selves" could exist within me at any time. I began to reveal and literally expose myself within



Figure 4: *Self Portrait as Muhammad Ali* #'s 1,2,3 and 4. Porcelain, vinyl, cotton, fabric dye, polyester, steel. 2008

these sculptures; however, in terms of bringing myself into the work, I felt I had a ways to go.

Also during this first year of graduate school, as I continued to evaluate the scale, installation and modification of these objects, I came to the conclusion that an object could neither encompass the potency of sound and movement nor the poetry of choreography and composition. I could not imbue an object with emotion. Once I had begun to investigate myself I realized how detrimental these aspects were to my work. Earlier in the year, I had begun making some short video pieces, but shied away from an actual leap into video. I used my digital camera to make short videos of myself interacting with trees, rocks, tadpoles, water, plants and other features of the landscape in public parks. During this time, the videos existed as a collection of experiences. The sound, movement and digital image created a potent moment of feeling: naiveté, deviousness, psychological isolation. I created intimate, live “portraits” of these emotions. I began rudimentary editing at this point, and I typically displayed these videos together as simple looping tracks on separate monitors.

At this point, I became apprehensive about moving so dramatically away from making objects because I was in an object-based program. I considered my options and decided to stay on in the Craft/Material Studies department while making efforts to engage my work with other mediums to facilitate this transition. I took classes in the Kinetic Imaging department and scheduled studio visits with professors from the Sculpture/Extended Media and Painting & Printmaking departments.

I continued making videos throughout the



Figure 5: *Tad*. Video still. 2008

summer, which led me to make some defining choices about my work in the fall. I began recording my visits to a public park just outside of Richmond in HD video. At first, I was just exploring. I would hold the camera while using my other hand to touch and play with whatever I came upon and had an urge to interact with. This working process allowed me to explore and create “experiences.” The forest I visited is part of a nearly 8,000-acre park. I went during the day when there was the least amount of people and treated the place as my material. While physically reacting to the forms, textures, movements and sounds in this place, I tried to figure out how to fit in. It became an obsession, not only because I was learning viscerally about this landscape, but also because I was sorting out my “selves” in the process.

The choice of a state park as the background for my explorations was based on my fascination with the dynamic between nature and civilization and their significant place in my upbringing. It was our family tradition to hike nearly every weekend when I was a child with my parents and siblings. Always an avid outdoorsman, my father would regularly take us camping, fishing or walking in shallow creeks in Ohio and Western Pennsylvania. I would explore the features of the landscape with a similar mentality as in the videos, but with the knowledge of being watched, by my parents instead of a camera. At that time, the idea of being observed suppressed urges to touch and fit my body to the landscape.

The park and video camera became my process and I used it to create my own context in an attempt to understand my current state of being. I found complete freedom there to act, explore made up situations and parts of my personality and to be comfortable with how I felt. It was a return to childhood imagination.

Currently, I am using HD video to create scenes showing images of the forest that include my body in some way. In many of the videos, I am touching things or holding still in a position which could grant me some further knowledge about what I am interacting with, often a tree. It is as if the position of my body or the act of listening to an inanimate object will give me an answer. I have experimented with different installations of single channel, multiple monitor setups and projections. I have chosen to record my work in HD

video because its' depth allows the incredible details of the natural world to be seen and it provides rich colors and textures.

Within the first two phases of this series, the real-time pacing conveys the idea of the experience of the act; however, the videos are looped so the time becomes a mystery. It makes me appear as a permanent fixture in the forest, just like the tree. The timing seems artificial or caused by magic. The sense of magic is emphasized by the illusion of me being in more than one place at one time when the monitors are displayed together. The real time and lack of edits and cuts give the video the feel of a live feed.

Inspiration and Influence

Video or the moving image with sound has always existed beneath the surface of things for me. I was a film major at the beginning of my undergraduate degree in 2000 and abruptly changed majors within the second year of school. A couple of years ago I acquired a

Hi8 video camera with the intent of starting a

video diary of my art-making process. I was planning to record myself in the ceramic studio because I would often get distracted from my work and dance or talk to myself or do weird things to furniture with my body, which you can see referenced in my current videos. I never did it because I lacked the confidence at the time to actually see it through. I have had these urges to self-document for years and VCU was finally the right place to take on this mode of working.

I look to the work of experimental film and video artists such as Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas and Ana Mendieta. These artists pioneered the use of video and sound in an art



Figure 6: *The Red Tapes*. Vito Acconci. Video still. 1977

context during the 1960's and 70's, while also including themes that have come to inform my research. These artists used the video camera and editing devices of their time to examine conditions of human interplay with nature and society as well as an intense study of the self. Seeing these works gave me the courage to make *The Pocahontas State Park Series*.

According to Chris Hedges, author of *I Don't Believe in Atheists*:

We live in a universe indifferent to our fate. We are seduced by myths that assure us that the world revolves around us, that fate or the gods or destiny have given us a unique role in the cosmos. It is hard to reject these myths and face the bleakness of human existence. It is more comforting and reassuring to have faith in our collective moral advancement as a species, to believe that we are heading toward something great and wondrous. The bitter reality of existence and the bondage of human nature, however are real. These myths are not. All those who tempt us to play god turn us away from the real world to flirt with our own annihilation.

A distrust and lack of compassion for society and culture has always existed beneath the surface of my work. I feel as if I have always been aware of both the seduction and bleakness that Hedges speaks of. I am intrigued by the ways in which I came to exist within these constructs in my own life, and what it would be like to exist in a different society and culture, one that is not created by humans. When I am "alone" in the park, I don't feel the pressure of judgment or the expectation of civilized behavior. I find that within this free, fringe space of the forest I am able to act in ways that help me cope with and contextualize my existence in society.

In Vito Acconci's *The Red Tapes* he conducts, like an elementary school teacher, a sometimes frenzied, sometimes extremely controlled production, in which he essentially breaks down a mingled personal and national history. In this video he pulls from history and contemporary culture and at the same time explores "self." Through performance and oral "soul searching," he narrates and illustrates this scattered, yet linear history and gives

us the purest look into himself in that moment. I am captivated by the way he uses language and text. It is basic and universal. It is how a kindergarten teacher explains things. In my own work, I am trying to communicate in a similar fashion. I use basic information to convey a basic topic, how my “self” has been contextualized by society verses how I contextualize my *own* “self.” My *own* “self” is less affected by culture and the media and unaffected by social norms and relationships and also, before *The Pocahontas State Park Series*, this self existed only in the realm of personal desire. I think Acconci expertly exposes this personal aspect in his past work.

Video has a relatively short history in the realm of fine art and it is in the beginning of this paradigm shift where artists really worked to manipulate their medium and see its extreme possibilities in every direction. Joan Jonas and her video piece *Vertical Roll*, 1972 is one example of this.

In her early work, Joan Jonas explored video in part, as a material, as in vertical roll.

"[Making] use of a jarring rhythmic technique to develop a sense of fragmentation, *Vertical Roll* uses a common television set malfunction of the same name to establish a constantly shifting stage for the actions that relate both to the nature of the image and to the artist's projected psychological state."

—David Ross



Figure 7: *Vertical Roll*. Joan Jonas. Video still. 1972

Jonas establishes her presence with her audience through the violent, repetitive, banging of a spoon. The sound seems to move the screen as the picture malfunctions and “rolls” to the top of the screen only to be replaced simultaneously by the same image of the live feed. By involving

and controlling what a viewer might understand about a medium as uncontrollable, she seems to have a strange mystical connection with the technology. In my work *New Here*, 2009 I attempt a similar approach with the use of a digital mirroring effect.

I have found catalysts for my thinking in the written work of Sir James Frazer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Michael Pollen, Samuel Beckett and Chris Hedges. These writers speak to the relationship of humankind with nature throughout history as well as the current conditions of the natural and civilized world. Part of my work and research focuses on the irony that exists in situations where an educated urban dweller tries to find something significant when lost within themselves in the constructs of civilized nature.

Another influence is a natural inclination to perform and choreograph movement. I remember the first time I saw a part of a Pina Bausch dance performance. It was the most classic yet contemporary thing I had ever seen. The minimal stage sets and costumes framed the physical expression that was happening on stage. Each breath, each movement was natural but weird and extreme at the same time. The dancers on stage were giving performances of heightened experiences. The mood was undramatic, yet entrancing. It was sexualized and robust like the earth. In my work I strive for this interplay of movement, expression and subtlety. I want to be like Janie when Zora Neale Huston describes her in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “She got so she received all things with the stolidness of the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference.”

Little Wanton The Pocahontas State Park Series

This thesis exhibition is the culmination of my time spent at Pocahontas State Park. There are three different phases of work within this series. Phase one encompasses handheld video work in which I explore surfaces and life forms in the natural landscape. Phase two is marked by the use of a tripod and use of my entire body in the image. In these works I am typically attempting to blend into the landscape by holding my body nearly still in a single place. Phase three begins to display and incorporate more video effects as well as a more refined manipulation of the video as a material. My technique and skill improved throughout the year allowing me to really push myself into a psychological space in the forest. Shifting from the handheld camera to a tripod saw a loss of intimacy as the camera stopped being an extension of my body, but allowed the viewer a higher level of intimacy with me as a performer. Working exclusively in this park has also acted as a vehicle for further investigation into the history of the relationship between humans and nature and how I fit into this history. For example, In Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Nature*, published in 1836, he says:

The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth become part of his daily food. In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man despite real sorrows.

The first phases of videos were made with a handheld camera and are simple interactions between my hand and dirt, mushrooms, ice, bark, grass, moss, etc. I caress, poke, tickle, fondle, scratch, knock against and finger these items. Some interactions are

easily recognizable and the natural artifact acts as a stand-in for some other thing we touch in the same way. For example, in *Questions Leaders Ask Themselves* I play with the small

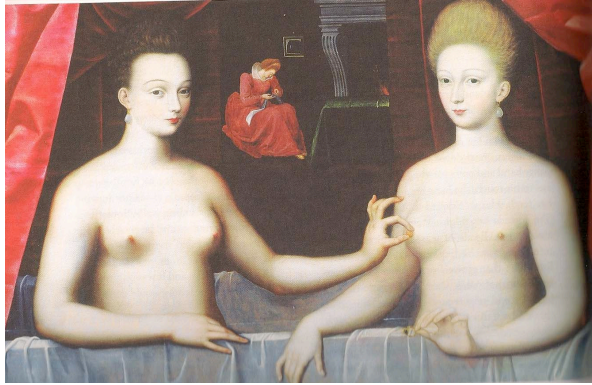


Figure 8: *Gabrielle D'Estrees and One of Her Sisters*, unknown artist of the School of Fontainebleau. 1594



Figure 9: *Questions Leaders Ask Themselves*, video still, 2009

ribbed dome of the mushroom cap, shyly at first and then with more vigor, until I place it between my thumb and forefinger so it looks as though I am pinching a nipple. I am constantly surprised by the familiarity of the natural world on micro and macro levels.

In the second phase I use a tripod mount to record my entire body interacting on a larger scale. Some of these interactions would involve me attempting to keep as still as the tree I was laying on or sitting in. These pieces function as extensions of the first works' exploration, but I use my entire body to explore with, in order to relate to larger physical masses, usually trees. In this phase of the work, force was the tone of the interactions. My persona went from naïve exploring to attempts at conquering. I would use my strength, my weight and verbal persuasion amongst other tactics to become a part of this world. I became very aware of time in this phase and it's strength as a part of the medium. In *Tree Jump*, 2008, I walk up to trees of different girths and attempt to jump onto them and hold myself on the tree for as long as I can. Though the piece blatantly records my pathetic attempts at endurance, the video is not about endurance. It is more about the pathetic attempt and the emotion, humor and tenderness of the situation.

In the third phase of work from the park, the editing is used to accentuate the emotive quality of the work. Within these videos I am able to digitally sharpen feelings of isolation, regret, insecurity and otherness through the use of video and sound effects. In these works I have begun speaking and opening up in a way in front of the camera which is outside of my “normal” personality.

This body of work is hinged on my appetite for self-discovery. In the same way that Pippilotti Rist embraces self expression and exhibition by performing for the camera in *I'm not the Girl Who Misses Much* I have found through the recording and editing process, a place of expression allowing me to



Figure 10: *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much*. Pippilotti Rist. video still. 1986

embody discomfort, wistfulness or other, various, unsociable human characteristics and study myself in these situations after the fact. These tapes offer a hard copy of an experience to be viewed repeatedly. I work like a sociologist interested only in herself and striving to understand 1) How I visually fit within this conserved, publicly recreational, natural landscape, and 2) The psychological space of being alone and of being among the only things in which I can be confident, my wits and physical nature. I try to push the idea of connecting with nature to its limit by contriving situations that involve parts of the forest in an attempt to spark a connection.

I experience a constant duality in my surroundings at most times. This duality comprises the habitually familiar and the alienating “newness” of each present moment. Samuel Beckett captures this idea in *Molloy* when he says:

My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke that still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?

It is a confusing mental space and it is through my work in The *Pocahontas State Park Series* that I study my own psychology of consciousness in relation to physical surroundings, specifically a forest that is thought to be the land where in 1613, Pocahontas was held captive by the English. This series has been the documentation of a search for “self” and an examination of emotional confusion and development as it was happening in my personal life. Through recording and examining emotions and actions out of context I am creating experiences in which the tender and sincere attempt exists but it is ineffective, naive and pathetic. It is within the nebulous dynamic of this relationship that meaning and humor emerge.



Figure 11: *New*. Video still. 2009



Figure 12: *Alphaville*. Film still. Jean-Luc Godard. 1965

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 Blend, FAB Gallery, Richmond, VA
- 2008** *The Candidates*-Central Fidelity Bank Building, Richmond, VA
 VCU/ Pratt exchange show, Steuben Galleries, Brooklyn, NY
 VCU, Arizona State University exchange show, The Step Gallery, Tempe, AZ
 Tangents, Slaughterhouse Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
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Self, Dana. *La Esquina's Happy Tree Friends is smarter and subtler than its title*. The Pitch. Kansas City, MO. March 17th, 2009.