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An Artless Dream

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An Artless Dream

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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Abstract

AN ARTLESS DREAM

By Lauren Abrams, MFA

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

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Major Director: Susie Ganch, Professor, Craft/Material Studies

The brain begins to collect and categorize information the moment we are born. It is masterful at identifying patterns and directing choices outside of our conscious awareness. Often, we are aware of a deliberate choice, but cannot rationally explain it. I find it striking how much of what we do is dictated subconsciously by our brains. This thesis is an investigation into contemporary discoveries in neuroscience and how they manifest themselves in my daily life and specifically my art practice.

Chapter 1 – The Influence of Neuroscience

In the moment when I was born, when I first opened my eyes and took my first breath, I began the journey to become the person I am today. All of this time, I have been collecting information, I have been seeing things, I have been noticing things. I look, I pretend, I am enchanted. While it is romantic to consider my current self as a progression from infancy to childhood into adolescence and adulthood, it is also impossible not to. I am a sum total of my experiences. While I am not a scientist, I have, through other's research, been trying to understand some new discoveries in neuroscience on how the brain functions. I find it interesting to think about how these ideas manifest in my daily life and specifically in my art practice. While working in my studio I am striving to create a piece that exists just beyond my mind's reach. Similar to a word being on the tip of your tongue, the work is on the tip of my brain. This sensation is related to the discoveries made by contemporary neuroscientists.

Our brains constantly collect information. They can identify patterns and direct our choices long before we are consciously aware of it. Even when we become aware of the deliberate choice we often don't know why we are making it. This is because the connection between our unconscious emotional brain and our conscious rational brain is a one-way path.

While it may seem that we are consciously and rationally interpreting the world, more often than we are aware, our emotional brain is directing our choices, decisions and perceptions.

For quite some time the brain has been considered to be divided into the right half and the left half; the rational part and the emotional part. The general thought has been that rationality is what separates humans from their animal counterparts. This is partially true. As far as we know we are the only earthly creatures who have a stream of consciousness. Further, it has been debated that as humans we must overcome our animalistic nature. The rational brain must rule over the emotional brain. It has been said that the emotional brain is just a leftover of evolution, undermining its importance. In modern neuroscience however, it has been proven that we cannot function without our emotional brain; it is an evolutionary masterpiece. It works with such speed and efficiency that it goes unnoticed. It is not part of our stream of consciousness, but is responsible for many of our decisions and actions.

Take for example a study conducted at Yale by John Bargh and Lawrence Williams that revealed a correlation between perception and physical temperature. Williams would approach people in a busy location and ask them to take part in a survey. The survey was simple; the participant was shown a picture of a man, Joe, along with a brief description and asked just one question: "How much do you like Joe?" When the person conceded to taking the survey, Williams, shuffling his things, would ask the participant to hold his hot or iced cup of coffee while he prepared. This only took a moment. The participant would fill out the quick survey and be on their way. The results of the survey are striking. They overwhelmingly showed that those who held the hot coffee believed Joe was warm and friendly and yes, they

“liked” him. Those who had briefly held the iced coffee did not.¹ What this implies, and what I find most interesting, is how arbitrary some decisions can be. I am not in control as much as I think I am. My stream of consciousness is influenced by my unconscious in combination with outside stimuli. If most of my decisions are driven by unconscious perceptions, then regardless of how rational I am, I am still not in control of my conscious thought. Conscious will is just an illusion.

In his book “How We Decide” Jonah Lehrer describes the case of Elliot who had a tumor removed from his cortex, near the frontal lobe of his brain. Prior to surgery, Elliot had been a great father and husband, had a good job and was active in his local church. However, post operation proved quite difficult for Elliot. His IQ stayed constant, testing in the 97th percentile, but he was incapable of making decisions. He deliberated endlessly over irrelevant details, such as whether to use a blue or black ink pen. He carefully analyzed every decision from where to eat lunch, to which radio station to listen to. Eventually, Elliot lost his job, his wife divorced him and he got into trouble with the IRS. What had happened to Elliot’s brain to make him so incapable of making decisions? His doctor, Antonio Damasio, described Elliot post surgery: “He was always controlled, always describing scenes as a dispassionate, uninvolved spectator. Nowhere was there a sense of his own suffering. . . I never saw a tinge of emotion in my many hours of conversation with him: no sadness, no impatience, no frustration.”² After his surgery Elliot was strangely devoid of emotion. To test this diagnosis, Elliot was hooked up to machines that measure physiological responses (sweaty palms, heartbeat, etc.) and shown images that

¹ “Is Free Will Really Free?.” *Radiolab*. Host Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich. New York Public Radio. WNYC, 2007. Web. 10 Feb. 2011. <www.radiolab.org>.

² Lehrer, Jonah. *How We Decide*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009. 14-18. Print.

typically elicit a strong emotional response: a severed limb, a naked body, a house on fire. The results were clear. Elliot felt nothing. If the commonly held belief is that rational decisions are better and emotions are irrational, then a person devoid of emotions should therefore, make the very best decisions. Elliot shows us that this is false. If the brain can't feel, it cannot make decisions.

Sights, actions, reactions, rewards, systems and patterns are all detected and recorded in the brain. A simple way to think about it is that our brains file things away like a filing cabinet or computer hard drive, but this is not exactly how it works. When we experience something – a loud noise, the taste of a new food – chemicals are produced in our brain and neurons are fired. When we experience the same thing again, the same combination occurs and the same paths are strengthened much like how repeatedly drawing over the same line with a pen will make it darker and wider. There are mechanisms in the brain that recognize patterns and anticipate the future. If we are surprised, we are overcome with feeling. It might be elation in the case of winning the jackpot or fear if something is out of the ordinary and unsettling. These patterns are miniscule, almost imperceptible. The conscious, rational brain can detect them only with intense and careful scrutiny, but the unconscious notices immediately and swathes the brain in feeling. A hunch, intuition, or a gut feeling is simply the brain reacting to an established pattern.

It is interesting to think about how this affects – helps or hinders – what I, as an artist do in my studio. There must be paths in my brain that have been created and strengthened to recognize beauty and intrigue. If I sit down to make something from my imagination that is beautiful, then I will naturally reach into that learned information and pull out a synthesis of all

the experiences that feel beautiful. As I put my pen to paper, or my hammer to metal, my brain is constantly filtering. If the marks I make align with the existing patterns, if they fit into “beautiful”, then the same feeling is created, and the same combination of chemicals is released.

Chapter 2 – In Between Fantasy and Reality

At the heart of my work is a desire to be transported out of reality. While I tend to be a pragmatic person outwardly, inwardly I spend much of my time fantasizing or daydreaming. My pragmatic self says I'm wasting time, that there is a right way and a wrong way to do things; the quickest route from A to B is a straight line. At the other end of the spectrum I am a free floater, my mind wanders. I make up alternate futures and realities.

My work prior to graduate school was a representation of fantasy as a physical object. Their implied function combined with the fact that they didn't work rooted them in reality. I am in a way coming full circle. My current thesis work also has much to do with fantasy. It transports me through process and imagery. The physical act of repetitive motion – drawing tiny circles or drilling thousands of holes – entrances me while my work prior to graduate school was a representation of fantasy. One is a physical transportation the other an imagined depiction.

I am transported out of my head (or way deeper into it) when I am fully concentrated on the tediousness of drawing thousands of tiny circles. Further, the imagery itself is not of this world. It is an amalgamation of botany, sea life, microorganisms, and cellular structure. This isn't intentional. These topics or images seduce me and when I'm making I am seduced into drawing them. My desire is to surround myself in this world I have created.

When I set out to draw, I focus not on the final outcome but on the immediate task at hand. The result of course looks like me because it came from me. It is not however a conscious string of decisions. I did not think "I will choose red because red is a fire-y color." Instead I feel fire-y, so I am drawn red. I set to work and purposefully reject thinking. I try to turn off my rational brain and pick what feels "right". I think in this way what looks and feels right is when my movement or choice coincides with what my emotional brain is feeling. I find it absurd and interesting to think about what is truly affecting my emotional brain and therefore my work. I do not intend to psychoanalyze myself; it is the mundane events I find most interesting. My feeling toward something could simply be dictated by the temperature of the room, whether or not the sun is shining, if I got a good night's sleep, if I dreamt anxiously, if I put my left foot on the floor first instead of my right foot. Similar to how contact with something hot or cold affected the outcome of John Bargh's study, numerous and seemingly unimportant facts that make up the day are directly reflected in the work I make.

Because I indulge in this tedious process for myself, I am transported through process out of reality. Although it is self-indulgent, I think others inevitably find something of the same in the finished pieces. The imagery triggers the imagination, and the viewer finds something new and different yet familiar at the same time. In addition, the intensity of detail creates a

visual exuberance and a delight in looking. My goal is for the viewer to have an intimate experience; by intensely looking they will spend some time noticing the details.

Chapter 3 – Process and Development

Reflecting on the time I've been in graduate school much has changed. Prior to graduate school, I was made small discreet objects. They could be described as sculpture on a jewelry scale. They were table-top mechanical sculptures whose parts and gears were fabricated by me. Because of their mechanisms, they had the appearance of function, but they were not useful in any utilitarian way. Each piece expressed simple movement in an overly elaborate way. In my first semester of graduate school, I had at least two revelations. First, I found I could express movement in a less direct way. I created a series of brooches that used alternative materials (to traditional jewelry's gold and silver) such as balloons, rubber tool dip, and fishing line that were gestural, implying movement in their form as opposed to requiring interaction with the viewer. Secondly, I found that jewelry satisfied my desire to make something small, intricate



Figure 1. Movement Brooches

and detailed while also more explicitly fulfilling a need for function. This was a huge step for me. I came to graduate school with a love of looking at jewelry, but with no intentions of making it, and what I found was that making jewelry was intensely satisfying.

For the culmination of my first year in graduate school and for my candidacy review I created a series of brooches using copper and silk thread. I began by rolling down copper sheet thinner and thinner until it was almost crispy. Technically speaking, about 30 gauge. Using wire, I made simple shapes: repeated circles, ovals and lines. After the formed wire was soldered it was rolled flat in the rolling mill, a tool with two parallel steel rollers that compresses the metal. The resulting shapes were traced onto the thin sheets of metal. The outline of the shape was formed in the sheet metal with a hammer and center punch against wood, creating a small bump on the other side. When this bump was filed away it created a small hole. In response to the outline, I drew with graphite directly on the sheet metal and also punched these drawings into the surface, filing away the bumps. The result was a thin, crispy piece of perforated metal. The shape of the brooch was determined by the finished drawing. The act of punching the metal created an undulating surface and a perfect place for the wire shape to fit. All of the parts were patinated and waxed and the wire shape “stitched” to the surface with silk thread through the holes of the outline.



Figure 2. Brooch from Stitched series



Figure 3. Brooch from Stitched Series



Figure 4. Brooch from Stitched Series

After completing this series of brooches I began to draw with marker and ink on paper. The drawings began much the same way the drawings on metal did, very simple and decorative. They could be called doodles. However as I continued working on the drawings they began to evolve into something more. They grew in size and became more elaborate. From far away they looked like shapes of different values and colors, but upon closer inspection the thousands of tiny circles came into focus. I consider this “drawing with a metalsmith’s eye”. While I’m using ink and paper, I am making marks that resemble marks I am familiar with in metal.

It is interesting to note that the jewelry began as drawings and that the drawings look like the jewelry and that the new jewelry resembles the drawings. There is this a push and pull happening between two-dimensional and three-dimensional, between the tangible and the

intangible. At times the drawings appear more dimensional than the object. The image in the drawing is more tangible than the image produced by the jewelry object.

For the series of jewelry presented for the thesis exhibition, I am using the drawing more explicitly. In some cases I have photocopied the drawing and used it as a template to cut and pierce sterling silver, making a shadow of the colorful drawing in white metal. In other cases I have mounted and sealed the drawing and then cast it in clear epoxy resin. The drawing is then cut apart and used directly in the jewelry.



Figure 5. "An Artless Dream". Installation view



Figure 6. Brooch from "An Artless Dream"



Figure 7. Brooch from "An Artless Dream"

Conclusion

My development in graduate school has been as much about understanding my studio practice as it has the evolution of my work. If in my first year I discovered that I was indeed a jeweler and found satisfaction in making jewelry, then in my second year I have found the need for other practices to inform my work. Drawing has enabled me to approach the jewelry with a fresh perspective. The common thread throughout my career as an artist has been that of fantasy. Whether it is displacement through repetitive process or a physical incarnation, it is this interest in the unreal which has fueled my research into the workings of the brain. What I have come to understand about the way in which our unconscious directs our choices and our imagination has influenced the way in which I work.