2011

Melancholy and the Infant

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“Melancholy and the Infant”

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
May 13, 2011
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank:

My soon-to-be wife, Janet Bruhn for her unwavering support and patience, especially in this last year of Graduate School, my family for their support and for making me who I am, my colleagues at VCU for good times and inspiration, VCU professors and visiting artists; Peter Baldes, Gregory Volk, Richard Roth, Christine Grey, Spencer Finch, Jill Moser, Matthew Day Jackson, Ron Johnson, Barbara Tisserat, Hillary Wilder, Hope Ginsburg, Stephen Vitiello, Jack Risley, and others for fostering the growth in my work during my time at VCU.

I would especially like to thank Holly Morrison for her belief in my work, her assistance in all matters during my time at VCU, and her orchestration of the ideal environment in which to learn.
Abstract

This thesis contains descriptions of works I have made over the last two years. These descriptions have been applied to support themes of melancholia, restraint, and indeterminacy, which serve as prevalent strains connecting recent work. A few stories are also shared in the way pieces come about through thinking and making.
(works listed clockwise, starting a top left corner) From Car to Studio, 2011, From Car to Studio (detail), Steamed Mirror (detail), Steamed Mirror, 2011, Vent Piece, 2011
ON THREE NEW PIECES

I endeavor to make work that is intimate in nature, seemingly effortless in its execution and reduced to retain an open reading.

New works such as “Steamed Mirror”, “From Car to Studio”, and “Vent Piece” present a particular self-conscious kind of making that resists the oppositional tropes of realism and gestural descriptions of form. From a distance these works appear to be faithful attempts at realism, but upon closer observation the dedication to the exactitude of this strategy fall away. The hardened drops of acrylic medium in “From Car to Studio” drip upward on its hanging hood. The stillness and permanence of the mist in “Steamed Mirror” are clues to it having been sprayed with clear dispersants. The slats in “Vent Piece” are placed in slots sporadically on one side and one slat is torn to reveal it being made of paper. Art is inherently an artificial experience. It is fundamentally the production and imitation of life and the conditions of living. These works state this fact quietly, yet emphatically in the way I approach and then collapse realistic rendering. The slight miss of precisely accurate realism is a subtle transgression from conforming to either exacting representational mimesis or gestural expressive posturing. The subtlety regarding what appears slightly off in each work expresses indeterminacy in its retained rupture of old conventions. The in-between state complicates the work by not permitting it to ground. These works posit that they exist in a reality where they reference the actuality of something such as a rainfall and the melancholia it symbolizes, yet simultaneously retain the specific, synthetic nature of processes and materials of their making.
When I first began graduate school, a cousin of mine was killed in Afghanistan. His body was flown back to Cleveland where it was buried in a closed-casket funeral. The funeral brought on the first cry I’d had since I my Grandfather’s funeral, when I was twelve. The funereal image of the flag folding ceremony will never leave my mind. Upon returning to my studio in Virginia, I found it difficult to make work. In a certain way, the funeral made me realize the depth of emotion one can feel when confronted with forms that are used to represent real, very emotionally-charged events. I wanted my work to come closer to provoking this response as this personal loss helped me comprehend issues of mortality and impermanence. My response led me to make pieces that occupy space decisively, to elicit emotions more clearly. The first piece, “Towel” consisted of folding a dirty white towel the way a flag is folded at a military funeral. The towel was stiffened so it stood on its point, propped in the corner of a room. This precisely folded form at once represents death, both the absence and representation of a body, and dedication to a cause that is bigger than an individual. The flag is replaced by a white towel that has evidence of use on its surface. The towel represents something more intimate than a flag. A towel is something we all use on our own bodies. It is something taken for granted in our daily existence. The replacing of the flag with a ubiquitously intimate material highlights the personal relationship to the deceased over the justification of the death because of a nationalistic cause. Although this piece reflects on a very vivid experience of loss, there is sweetness and personal respect paid in the form. Sadness is a reoccurring theme in my work; whether through referencing tears, denying sensory pleasure, or the use of somber tones. But, the sorrow felt in the work is presented with the intention of provoking a pensive state through the indefinite nature of the form. In this indeterminate state, there is potential for creating a sense of relief by filling an emotional void.
MELANCHOLY

Pieces like “Towel” embody retained sorrow and provoke a sense of melancholia. Melancholy is defined as “a thoughtful and gentle sadness” (Encarta). It is this very thoughtful and gentle nature which distances feeling melancholic from feeling depressed. Depression is stifling creatively, in its shutting down of productive mental activity, while melancholy allows for creativity through a persistent kind of thoughtfulness. In a time when evidence of ecological and economic crisis increases daily, the quality of living in a melancholic state--continuing to be mindful and engaged despite a strong sense of difficulty--seems appropriate. For an individual living today, the lack of control over the circumstances of their life, due to man-made or natural forces, weighs heavy on the mind and body. Having faith in something that demands focus and discipline provides a way of dealing with the everyday anxieties brought on by the conditions of life. Making and experiencing art provides the opportunity to recreate personally significant experiences by interpreting a manifestation of thought with form. The use of familiar, worldly forms in art assist in achieving a shared subjective experience. It seems pertinent now that objects selected from the world be changed from their ready-made form in a way that presents a progression of thought. When this occurs at its best, objects that are found and instilled with plausible, yet skewed and indefinite gestures, reveal what is missing from common perceptions of existing forms. Light is shed on insufficiently examined issues of art, culture, and society.

No EXIT, 2011
Neon Piece, 2009
The works “No EXIT” and “Neon Piece” evoke melancholia through denied illumination. The lit light bulb as a symbol of arrived-at thought is referenced in these works through the absence of light. “Neon Piece” uses my likeness, looking down at a plug hanging just above an outlet, to cite pensive self-consciousness as a restricting force. The irony of the work lies in how this depiction of restriction provides a sense of creative development through the unconventional use of neon as a material. A more recent work “No EXIT” similarly refers to illumination negatively using an exit sign. Here, a commonplace material is transformed to refer to social issues larger and more abstractly than “Neon Piece.” The openness of the work allows for leaps to be made in its interpretation. Its place in the center of a wall, states the obvious fact that below the sign is a wall and not an exit. This elicits thoughts on the physical and mental barriers constructed in everyday life. I am interested in creating open forms such as “No EXIT” that inherently contain an interpretive flexibility through their proximal relationship with other works. For instance, when paired with a work like “Towel”, “No EXIT” elicits charged political content about the United States’ ongoing military occupation of foreign countries. I steer clear from recreating these types of expected connections in my installations, favoring instead the attempt at producing generative experiences.
ACUTE PERCEPTION

Experiencing objects in physical space allows one to slowly observe and attribute meaning to the way the objects were made, what they are made of, and how they exist in relation to your own body. My work depends on the condition of slow time, and through its restrained appearance, attempts to request this condition from the viewer. I attempt to use restraint to draw the viewer in to discover the core emotive content that, from a distance, is hidden. My research is principally concerned with the limits of perception in a still form.

Mirrors, 2011
Two recent pieces exemplify a study in acute perception. The work "Mirrors" employs two mirrors, whose reflective surfaces face each other, lying on top of the opened cardboard packaging of one of the mirrors. The piece rests humbly on the floor. From a distance the piece looks like the back of a mirror lying inside its packaging. The mirrors used are cheap, full-length mirrors--the type hung on closet doors. The mirrors take on an anthropomorphized identity of two bodies laying one on top of the other reflecting each other infinitely. The piece is positioned under a fluorescent light that mimics the shape of the open box and adds a spiritualized romanticism to the lowly manufactured materials.

"Lows" also demands acute visual perception. This piece came from a drawing of two stick figures formed of nooses. The noose figures are about to shake hands as if they are sealing some sort of suicide pact. This drawing proposed the challenge of making something that contained irreverent humor using a signifier of death and despair. I was very tentative to make the work. The noose is not a form with open meaning. The history of suicide and lynching a noose embodies makes dealing with the form a serious endeavor. This responsibility the form presented was increased by living in the Richmond, Virginia, the former capital of the confederacy, while making the piece. I began to see injustice—personal or social—as the linking characteristic in the noose used to carry out suicide or lynching. Upon tying my first noose in the studio, I felt the gravity of seriousness in the form. I imagined a person tying the noose for the purpose of suicide. Ashamed and reluctant to carry out the piece, I reacted by attempting to use the form to evoke a slight sense of hope rather than despair. I wrapped the noose in another noose, drenched the tangle in resin, affectively neutering the piece. I then placed the wet mass in a plastic shopping bag—mimicking the shape and form of a bag of trash or shit about to be tossed a way. This work attempts to capture the decisive moment of ridding oneself of the negative thoughts of despair. The work intimately reflects this sense of overcoming through obscuring the form. The piece becomes about quiet, personal triumphs over pain and despair through a nearly unobservable means of expression.
George Baker’s essay “Lateness and Longing” states,

*For some time now, we have witnessed a general turn in contemporary art to the exploration of obsolescent mediums, outmoded forms, and discarded or abandoned historical objects. Anachronistic experiences seem privileged in such work; old age no longer remains an object of derision. Artists express interest in “slow time” as opposed to speed and efficiency. The in-between non-act of waiting or simply lingering, even languishing, fills out the sites of resistance or the stranded historical remnants reclaimed by such work. Redemption—of failed or untapped historical processes—seems the order of the day. Memory—more collective or social than individual, yet more wistful or impoverished than monumental—plays a central role.*

What Baker is describing in this essay continues to apply to much current work. Many contemporary artists use processes with established period or era-specific meaning (based on its previous technological prowess and cultural appropriateness), which have been generally deemed outmoded in current times. Baker’s lens sees the usage of these processes here as an act of redemption—art saving a manner of production from being obsolete by using it as content that implicitly revives. Content is formed through the piece or project acting in the face of up-to-date, more expedient and efficient methods of production. Through the outdated process applied, this work suggests a longing for a certain way things were once done and comments on the uncertainty involved in the agency of progress.

My work differs from the type of work Baker redemptive nature of the work described here in that I attempt to breach accepted applications of already tapped, out-dated methods. Ironically, I find these transgressive efforts as a way of redeeming old, established forms. This attitude is deployed in the mash-ups of pop songs I make. The “mash-up” is a technique of paying two or more songs simultaneously to create a new composition. This form has been around since musice concrete and is generally considered a passé technique today (with the one exception of the Girl Talk). My work “We Belong Together” consists of combining 100 different songs titled “We Belong Together.” The source songs were merged so that their ending coincides with the end of the longest track, resulting in increasing volume and distortion as more tracks come in over the 5:30 of the composition. The distortion of many voices combined with the idealism of the title creates an anthem for dystopic union. Achieving the necessary chaotic content in this piece depends on using the mash-up as a form. My practice is concerned with creating essential relationships between form and content; even when a given form feels culturally over-used.

A popular issue amongst artists and art-writers today is the addressing of what one does in an era when everything in has been, and is being done in Art. A way of philosophically dealing with this question lies in seeking out and emphasizing the differences between works of art. I’ve learned that this mindset induces productivity, even though it doesn’t exactly provide a solution. “We Belong Together” may use a familiar, established means in its creation, but the end product reflects that the means being used is vital to the work in its distortive transgression. The specific breach in the work makes this manifestation distinct, which is a quality the work I emphasize as I attempt to expand my practice.
THE BABY

The notion of making a sculpture of a baby came in reaction to the use of absence in my work, paradoxically referencing the presence of a figure through nonexistence. This absence created the desire to address issues of mortality and anthropomorphization from a different perspective by direct representation of a figure. Inclusion of the figure in my work seemed to oppose past strategies. It revealed a desire to speak about the beginning of life rather than the end; thus the form of the baby.

Upon researching options for making this piece, I discovered a service for creating realistic, 3-dimensional representations of babies called “reborning”. Very popular on eBay, the process of “reborning” requires submitting reference photographs. The most typical reborn is made referencing the photograph of an actual newborn. The artist uses these photos to select the proper body kit and pre-made head from various manufacturers. The face can also be custom sculpted and cast to match features of the subject more accurately. Once the parts are selected, paint is applied to the body and head using a spraying and stippling technique. Many layers are applied to achieve a realistic, mottled affect to imitate rosy infant skin. The hair is individually implanted into the head and eyebrows, eyeballs are inserted, the parts are assembled, and the doll is dressed. Some “reborn” artists go as far as recreating the setting of the reference photo and photographing the doll. There are also dolls which are solely conceived by the craftsmen themselves. These dolls go on the market as “adoptable” dolls.

This type of production reveals a deep human fascination with photo-realism as a technique to produce wonder and awe. Many infants look generally similar, especially newborns. This fact is exploited in the
process of making a reborn baby doll. Manufacturers of kits have come up with likenesses that are rough averages of puffy eyed infants of various races. There are many facial expressions to choose from that allow for the individualization of dolls in the hands of a skilled reborer. Reborn craftsmen, mostly middle-aged women, use a technique similar to one I used in pieces such as “No EXIT”, “From Car to Studio”, and “Steamed Mirror”; where the surface of a ready-made object is altered. The manufactured aspect of doll making in relation to the procreation of children (especially in a white, suburban, middle-aged context) speaks to a skepticism I employ to complicate the commissioning of “The Baby.”

My outlook regarding the work was informed by the biography of the reboner I employed to carry out the project. She is a mother of two, living in Ohio, who works a full-time job. At one time, she also homeschooled her children. She began reborning following a miscarriage from her first pregnancy. She used this act of recreation as a way to cope with the immense tragedy of losing her unborn child. After looking at her website and seeing the variety of projects she has taken on—including making a Spock baby—I knew she would be game for just about anything. I felt her work was coming from a genuine attempt to spread joy through her creations.

Compared to the standard approach to reborning that uses baby photos as reference material, “The Baby” is unusual in the process of its creation. I sought to emphasize the humor in the similarities between the processes of conception and the creation of a real human baby and a “reborn” baby doll. I provided my reborn artist with photos of Janet (my fiancée) and me as adults for her to reference. I asked her to create an infant based on how our child might look. In a sense, she becomes an objective third party. The adult pictures provide her with little information of what her subjects looked like as babies and thus increase the element of surprise in the look of the final product. The few stipulations I had were that the doll be awake and have a relaxed body (a lot of the doll body kits have gripping fingers and toes). The rest was left open. The element of surprise in the appearance of the baby doll runs parallel to the actual anticipation of a newborn. This project is based on how creative processes of production tend to be anthropomorphized as a way of understanding and coming to terms with these processes. It is common to hear people refer to projects that require labor as “their baby” and terms such as “conceiving” (as in conceiving an idea) are used to describe both the production of a creative endeavor and making a baby. Another parallel of production is the unpredictable “due date” of the baby. The baby wound up being late for the exhibition portion of my thesis. This left me with figuring out how to present the project and the absence of the baby in the exhibition. Luckily, the day before the exhibition, I received pictures of the baby in progress. I carried the pictures in my wallet and showed them to those who attended the opening.

“The Baby” metaphorically serves as a beacon of hope for the future. The form of a baby represents a new beginning. Taking care of a baby requires responsibility and dedication. As an artist, leaving the shelter of the institution, I feel a similar sense of responsibility towards my practice. I will no doubt reflect back my time spent in graduate in order to remind myself of the rigor and discipline required for ideas to grow. Despite being uncertain, I have hope for what the future will bring and how I will navigate life’s decisions. Graduate school has taught me that responses to circumstances of life must be considered case by case and that all decisions are arrived at subjectively. With these simple concepts in mind, I aim to continue distilling personal experiences down to the essence of their particular emotions and embedding this into complex manifestations of form.
WORKS CITED