2014

THRESHOLD

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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THRESHOLD

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

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Major Director: Andréa Keys Connell
Assistant Professor, Craft/Material Studies

Are the threshold experiences encountered between waking and sleeping similar to the liminal space between life and death? The sights, sounds, and bodily sensations experienced in the unconscious void blur the lines between the unknown and our conscious existence. Using the figure, I portray how the body might exist in these transitional moments. Through my investigations into sleep paralysis, dream states, and notions of an afterlife and the soul, I explore how we perceive the self in these altered states of consciousness.
After Life

Is death an ending or a beginning? I come from a family that firmly believes in an afterlife and spoke about it frequently throughout my upbringing. This wasn’t only influenced by their religious beliefs, but by the loss of my mother’s youngest sister at the age of 32—when I was only 5. Hearing the stories my family told about their encounters with the deceased shaped my awareness and sparked my curiosity. Is there life beyond death, an opportunity to begin an entirely new existence? What if we could experience those who have died in our dreams? Do we then even for a moment coexist in the same space? Perhaps we always exist alongside one another in life and death, separated by a thin veil between this world and the next.
Encounters

My mother spoke of seeing her sister standing at the foot of her bed shortly after she died—a large white light hovering before her. She also shared stories of encounters with her deceased grandmother. During a difficult time in her life, her grandmother visited her each night. She could feel her walk into the room, and either sit in her rocking chair or at the foot of her bed. My mother never seemed frightened by these experiences; rather they calmed and comforted her. She saw them as a gift. I remember trying to wrap my mind around the idea that my mother could feel a spirit make an impression on the bed even though it had no physical weight.

It excited me to think that spirits could exist among us – as if there were a whole other world going on around me that I just couldn’t see. I secretly wanted to have my own encounter with a ghost. I would turn the lights off in my bedroom and stare into the darkness, hoping that something would appear to me. Sitting silently alone in my dark room, eyes open, waiting for something to happen’ both frightened and excited me. While waiting for my eyes to adjust, all my other senses became heightened; noises were louder and I had a greater awareness of my body, which created a sensation of ‘feeling’ or sensing things that I could no
longer, see. For a moment I would feel lost in a space that felt so large and infinite. Then as my eyes adjusted I could start to make out shapes I recognized and I would be brought back to my room.

Oddly enough, I never felt alone in my room growing up. I can’t explain the sensation, but I always felt there was someone with me, watching me when I would go to sleep. My mother’s advice was to ask whoever was there to please leave me alone. She never doubted me, which helped me feel better and let me know I probably wasn’t crazy; but it also reinforced my belief that there actually might be someone or something with me in my room. I would lie in bed and ask whoever was there to leave me alone, and wait. Then I would quickly pull the covers over my head and wrap them tightly around my ears in case I heard a reply.
The Healers

In my early teens, I began to realize that I came from a long line of women who had heightened intuition. Many of the women on my mother’s side did some type of healing and had different kinds of spiritual encounters throughout their lives. It wasn’t just my mother who had stories—all of my aunts had similar stories too, and often about the same people. One of my great aunts could heal burns through touch, and another performed a ritual to take away the ‘Malocchia’ (Italian for Evil Eye) to protect from harm and ill intention. My mother and one of her sisters practice a type of energetic healing known as ‘Reiki’, and another was trained as a hypnotist and guided past life regression sessions. I began to put together how these traditions and alternative ways of seeing were considered a special gift. At a young age my sister and I were taught to ‘feel’ and sense things that we could not see or hear, and to trust our bodily intuition. All of this made me aware of a whole new realm of things that I ‘knew’ but could not see.
Seeing the Shadow

I lay down to take a quick nap at a friend’s house when I was awakened abruptly, as if something was pulling me out of a deep sleep. I felt hazy and in a confused panic, as I often do when I wake up suddenly. I tried to move but my body was completely numb—paralyzed, and heavy, as if someone was sitting on my chest, preventing me from getting up. For the life of me, I could not move. I was aware of my surroundings, but everything seemed distant. My hearing was muffled, there was a buzzing tone in my ears, and my vision was blurred. I tried to speak, but could not utter a word. With my mouth agape and eyes open, I was stuck in that moment, watching and experiencing everything happening slowly. I could hear the television in the room and faint footsteps behind me. I sensed a shadow-like figure standing over me as I lay immobile, but I knew I was alone in the house. It was a woman, perhaps in her 60’s. I felt like I was in two places at once, consciously aware, but not in control of my body. I had never been so aware of my body and the sensations I felt than at that moment when I couldn’t use it. What was in fact a brief moment lasting seconds, seemed to go on for minutes. Was I in between a dream or was something else happening? I had the same experience two more days in a row.
Later that week, I told my friend who owned the house about what happened and about the shadow figure I felt standing over me. To my surprise she told me that a woman fitting that same description was murdered in the house a few years before. She was excited by my experience, but I was a little stunned—not because of what happened but because of the confirmation I had gotten from her.

After some research I found that what I was experiencing was a phenomenon commonly referred to as Sleep Paralysis. There are many theories on its causes, both scientific and supernatural, but it is commonly thought to be a transition state between wakefulness and sleep, characterized by complete muscle weakness. It is described as a disruption in REM sleep, where dreaming is frequent, but because the muscles are so relaxed, if the person wakes they feel paralyzed. Many people that have experienced it claim to have the same feelings of numbness, being unable to speak or move, hearing footsteps, and seeing a shadow or figure near them. This seminal experience set in motion a body of research and investigation into sleep paralysis and the unconscious that has changed the way I think about the possibilities within the unconscious space.

I became fixated on that heightened, fleeting sensation that seemed to prolong that one particular moment. I wanted to freeze and examine what I felt was an experience of stretching time, and I brought this experience into my work. Initially, I looked to early types of animation because of the way smaller moments were compiled into a longer experience.
I also looked to literature and folklore to examine sleep as a metaphor for death. I became fascinated by the traditions and customs surrounding death, particularly the ways in which people’s bodies and identities were preserved after death—especially through death masks, and the 19th century practice of post-mortem photography. In both, the deceased were portrayed as if they had just fallen asleep. I began to see the many physical similarities between sleep and death: the relaxed posture of the body, the carelessly extended hand, and the facial expression so calmly composed.

*Depart (24 frames per second)*, 2012.

Inspired by my investigations of death masks and post-mortem photography, I created ‘Depart’ (24 frames per second) which was the breakdown
of the word ‘depart’ spoken in one second prolonged into a moment that can be experienced slowly or all at once by the viewer.
Preserving the Vessel

Coming from a large Italian family, I have attended many traditional Catholic funerals and open-casket wakes. Over the past few years, I began to really pay attention to the comfort that it brought people to see their loved ones as they remembered them—in their Sunday best, hair perfectly set, tie straight, nails done. There seemed to be an obsession with capturing them as they looked in life. I began to think about how much death is romanticized in our culture, only paying attention to the before and after, and glossing over the process in between, the dying itself. Morticians can actually make it appear as if the deceased have a faint smile on their face, forever in a state of peace.

When I went to my grandmother’s funeral I was nervous to see what she would look like. Approaching her casket, I felt relieved. She looked beautiful, and just as I remembered her. I stared at her, waiting for her chest to rise and fall, waiting for her hand to twitch. She was sleeping. I stared into her face, and remembered the last things she said to me when I saw her only a few months before at my Aunt’s funeral.

The irony of our last time together being spent at a different funeral was not lost on me. She had told me she was proud of me and that she was going to miss
me so much, then burst into tears. I had a feeling she knew she would never see
me again after that day, and honestly I did too. I hugged her a little longer and
harder before I left that day. Trying to take in as much of her as I could, the touch
of her skin, the smell of her hair, her physical presence.

After her funeral I started to think back on the stories my mother had told
me about seeing her sister and grandmother after they died. I began to wish that
my aunt and grandmother would come to me somehow. Maybe they would appear
to me in my bedroom at night before I went to sleep, or in the bathroom when I
was doing my hair. Or maybe I would hear them speak to me. I knew it was not
something I could just turn on whenever I wanted, but soon realized that I could be
with them in another way—in my dreams.
Feeling The Presence

Shortly after my grandmother died, I had a very powerful dream about her. I had been thinking about her constantly. I wanted to see her and tell her how much I missed her; how I missed hugging her and hearing her voice. I was hoping that I would see her, hear her, or that I would get some sense of her around me.

I was in and out of sleep one morning, when she came to me in a dream. She was telling me how much she loved me and how proud of me she was for some recent accomplishments. She hugged me, a true embrace, and I remember really feeling her hug in my dream, but also in my physical body. In that instant I felt an incredibly strong heat coming from my chest—a warm burning sensation and arms wrapping around me. *She was hugging me at that moment.* I woke up suddenly, chest still burning, and burst into tears. I felt as if she was really there, hugging me in that instant, existing in the same space as me. This very real and physical interaction made me realize that there may be much more to the unconscious than I could ever imagine. Perhaps it could be the one place where we may be able to really exist together—in life or death.
To Float, To Fall, To Fly: The Out of Body Experience

As my research progressed I began to think about similarities between sleep and death and how they may form a view into a shared state of unconsciousness. But what would this shared space feel like for the person experiencing it?

When making ‘Above Myself’, I wanted to capture what the body might look like to the soul during one of these threshold states. What would it be like to look down upon myself from above? What does it feel like to be untethered from the body? Does it feel like floating, falling, or flying? Maybe that feeling is the same as when we enter a threshold state, hovering in a space outside ourselves.

Above Myself, 2013.
I began to think more about being free from the gravity of the body and what material could best capture that, since clay is visually grounding. I created a marionette figure with kinetic limbs, allowing free range of motion when hung from the wall, appearing to float in space. The limbs and head were ceramic, giving weight to an otherwise floating body, which I encased in a cloud of wool.

Linger, 2013.
The Immaterial Material

A recent focus of mine has been to find a way to give form to the immaterial aspects of a living being. This drive to portray the ‘spirit’ as an intangible entity has been one of my greatest challenges. I began experimenting with other materials to portray that ephemeral quality of a being that I could not translate through my ceramic forms. I worked with different varieties of paper, and eventually chose facial tissue for its emotional significance, its transparency, and the skin-like qualities, wrinkling and sagging when combined with rice paste glue.

When contemplating the role of the figure in my work, I think of the body as a vessel, capable of holding so much history, emotion, and experience. This translated into constructing human-sized vessels out of soft armatures and papier mache the facial tissues onto them. After the tissues dried I was left with a thin translucent paper shell, resembling some kind of wrinkled skin.
These forms quickly became vessels that I or someone else could wear in order to approximate my experiences in threshold states. They also functioned well as a way of recreating, for the wearer, the sensations I felt during my sleep paralysis moments, distorting their awareness of physical space and restricting their movements. These tissue shells would sink and sag with time and from body heat after the wearer had been inside of them, constantly changing and recording.

Marta’s Shell (After), 2013.
the person that inhabited it. These shells served both as objects and as spaces to be activated and animated when the viewer moved inside of them.

*Remy’s Shell, 2013.*
Capturing Ghosts: Projections and ‘Soul Studies’

After researching the works of Tony Oursler and his piece, ‘The Influence Machine’, which consists of projected images of large faces onto trees, smoke, buildings, all seeming to try to communicate from another world, I realized that using light and projections as a material in my work would open the door to the spirit or immaterial being that I had been trying to capture for so long. Like Spirit Photography from the early 1900’s, I saw this as an opportunity to materialize the ‘ghost or soul’ of a person that I had been trying to capture in the figure.

These video projections were a way to portray the soul and also animate it. I began creating ‘Soul Studies,’ brief projected works created outside, on houses and the nearby snowy suburban landscape. The video I projected was one I had created of myself feeling around a space with my eyes closed. Seeing myself projected into this open landscape helped me to understand what I had been attempting to describe in my work. My self-projection looked lost wandering through the black void, unaware of the surroundings, stumbling through the unknown.
Soul Study: Away From the Light, 2014.

Soul Study: In the Snow, 2014.

Losing Myself in the Dark Again: The Sensory Deprivation Tank

Following the “Soul Studies” and continuing to think about the sensorial experiences I had during my sleep paralysis and in my dreams, I wanted to further explore sensorial experiences in a state of altered consciousness. How are all the senses ignited and heightened when one is in these altered states? I mostly wanted to focus on the sight, touch and aural sensations. I wanted to experience a dark silent void—which was how I began to envision both the unconscious state and the afterlife. In order to approximate this experience for myself I looked to Sensory Deprivation/Floatation Tank Research. These tanks are the size of a sedan, and have multiple uses such as relaxation, pain relief, igniting unconscious hallucinations and meditation practices.

At my session, I stepped into the tank, which was filled with 11” of water and 1200 lbs. of Epsom salts. I lay down on my back and automatically floated to the surface. The water inside is heated to match average body temperature, which caused me to lose awareness of the boundary between my body and the water. I turned out the tank light and floated in complete silence and darkness. Stillness. All I could hear was my breathing, my heart pumping. A calm came over me. My hands were tingling. I kept my eyes open, and my heart began to race. This was it.
I was floating. I was no longer confined by my body; alone, in the dark, it was just Me.
During my research I became interested in the aural experiences near death, and found that sound is actually the last sense to go. I came upon ‘Threshold Choirs’, which are choirs that sing to the ill and dying to bring ease, comfort, and peace in the final stages of life. They go to their clients’ bedsides and sing to them in 20-30 minute long increments. Threshold songs are often framed like mantras, composed of one or two lines, repeated, and harmonized.

I had considered using sound as a medium to create an emotional space that my figures could exist in, pausing or elongating time using sound. I contacted a Threshold Choir in Charlottesville, VA, and they agreed to sing for me so I could better understand this experience and possibly use their songs in my work. Upon meeting with the choir, I asked them to recreate an actual scenario, as best they could, so I could better understand the experience.

On the day of recording I arrived at the host’s house a little before the choir so I could set up my equipment. The space was intimate and comfortable, and I was curious how so many people would fit into such a small room. About 14 women arrived and took their places around a modest reclining chair placed in the middle of the room. As I was about to press the 'record' button, they offered to sing
to me in the chair so I could receive the full experience. I lay in the chair with a handheld microphone recorder in my hand so I could capture the exact sound of being sung to in that situation. I closed my eyes and tried to remain still. I was anxious at first, lying down in front of all these strangers. As they sang I began to relax, my breathing slowed down, I stopped twitching, and I began to really listen.

They kept silent for a few minutes prior to beginning their song in an effort to create a calm and quiet space in the room. They began to sing, one voice at a time ‘All is forgiven, move on’ and then repeated it, as the rest of the women joined in. I was completely surrounded by them, singing directly to me, singing into me. The room filled with their voices. As I closed my eyes I began to forget where I was. After each song they would stop and hold a minute of silence, sitting with their eyes closed. At first I was confused by the silence, but as they went on I began to understand. The leader would play the tone of the next song and they would begin again. ‘You are not alone, I am here beside you’ repeated over and over. Some singers were sitting feet away from me, some right next to me. Their voices filled the room and the space around me, filling my whole body and all of my thoughts, creating a space with their voices. I could feel my body vibrating. As each silent pause came, I could feel the song resonating, echoing through the silence. As they continued to sing I became emotional, hearing their words repeated over and over with so much love and hope. I can only imagine what a comfort this must be for those that are actually near death.
After an hour of singing I felt incredibly positive and rejuvenated, my mood had totally altered. After processing this experience I realized that it was not only the songs I was interested in, but the power of the silences in between them.

*Recording the Charlottesville Threshold Choir, 2014.*
Threshold: Thesis Show

For my thesis show, ‘Threshold’, I created a large-scale installation of 6 shadow-like figures engaging with one another in a liminal space. It was my intention to treat the actual space as a threshold itself, creating a physical boundary that the viewer could engage with, dividing the space and allowing them to cross over onto either side. The threshold itself consists of two figures connected as one, and facing in opposite directions, creating an infinite entry and exit into and out of the space. The space is dimly lit with purple tones so the abstracted black bodies become silhouettes, changing in form as you move throughout the space, shifting your visual perspective.

Morphing and altering the physical body, I use the figure as a shadow to portray these physical transitions so that the shadow—infinite and fleeting, becomes a solid entity. I treated the surface with ink and charcoal, which absorbed the light in the space, and heightened the experience of the shadows for the viewer. By masking the body, I stripped them of their recognizable physicality, their gender, their age.
Seemingly unaware of their surroundings, the figures appear to be reaching for one another, longing for contact or another being to connect with. Two figures stand back to back, barely touching one another, centimeters apart, combining into one form as you walk around them.

The piece became fully activated once there were people walking among the figures, interacting and mimicking their gestures and posture. The figures became animated through human interaction, seeming to quiver and almost float as the viewers gaze shifts between figures and people nearby and across the room.
Conclusion

My graduate school experience has opened up many new ways for my work to take form. In addition to refining my skills as a sculptor, it has been gratifying to explore other ways of expanding my work through new materials, performance, sound, video projections, and learning how these production methods can enhance one another.

My main goals were to create interactive experiences through my figures, and to increase the scale of my work to life size. Considering my subject matter, I was challenged to find the best materials to represent the body through different states of consciousness without relying on facial expression or gesture. Through abstraction of the body, I allowed for more personal response from the viewer, while maintaining the human quality of the figures.

My future work will continue to explore these liminal states and how the body and soul animate each other. How can I further animate the form in its stillness? How can I evoke ‘sensing’ a presence rather than just visually perceiving it? I plan to further explore the use of video projections and sound in conjunction with the figures I create in order to enrich the experience for the viewer.