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(Un)Veiled: An Examination of Conscience

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(Un)Veiled: An Examination of Conscience

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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Acknowledgments

This is dedicated to my beloved Grandmother, Mezzy.
May she rest in peace.

- Mary Helen Sheridan -
(1936-2005)

Thank you to Anatole Upart for your undying reverence, your passion, your patience and your love. Thank you to my Mother, whose example has shown me the real meaning of femininity; a true southern lady. Thank you to Sonya Clark, for a very special hair date and your perpetual support, to Susan Iverson for being the ultimate maternal art mentor and to Jack Wax for both, the best and worst critique of my graduate school career. Also a big thank you to my peers and especially my studio mates, Ginger Metzger and Rena Wood, without you, I would have forgotten to laugh. I am so thankful to each of you for your enthusiasm, your encouragement and your tough love. Much love to you all.
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Abstract

(Un)Veiled: An Examination of Conscience

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Director: Susan Iverson
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I use the body to investigate the ideas of morality, mourning and mortification. I look towards costume history, traditional Catholic rituals and themes in 19th century literature to feed my obsession with transformation, reconciliation and communication through dress.

My making focuses on feminine objects and materials. Lace, veils, undergarments and hair adornment speak not only of womanhood, but also of the duality of human nature. Lace speaks of purity and sexuality, it reveals and conceals, it is humble, yet gluttonous in its ornamental overindulgence; lace is the ultimate dichotomy. I use it as a potent symbol to represent the duality of body and soul, right and wrong, good and evil. Historically, neglected, disheveled and unbound hair was a sign of mourning and penance, a physical representation of one's sin and sorrow. In my work, hair comes to represent an uncomfortable binding of one's self to one's alter ego, while helping to serve as an act of penance and mortification.

As I make, my hands hopelessly yearn to create beauty from burdens; the repetitive and penitential process of stitching creates a metaphor for my longing towards perfection and purification. My use of video, photography and installation work to provide a unique experience for the viewer, for here they are invited to enter these imaginary worlds of wonder.
Chapter 1

The Body

It is often through our bodies that we experience life. Not one person is separate from this experience, it is the one thing that unites our human experience. Through our senses we view the world and we allow our body to become a mirror, a tangible reflection of our emotions, our thoughts and our state of being.

I use the body as an underpinning of my self-expression. Knowing our vulnerabilities and weaknesses, knowing our desires, I am able to use the raw emotions that are associated with the body to support the concepts and themes in my work.

It was during my first semester of graduate school that I began exploring the boundaries of my materials, my concepts and the rules of my process. I found myself working on small studies, while utilizing a variety of materials: wood shavings, netting, hair, wire, yarn and dried vegetation. I began pinning these studies to my studio wall, as a way to build a visual vocabulary and with the hope of stumbling across that ah-ha moment. As I took a step back from my wall, I realized that every study I had been creating, was in some way referencing the body; these objects began to take on the look of internal organs, utilizing nature to mimic the look of my hair and woven structures to create the wrinkled, fleshy maze of my entrails. Each object was imbued with emotion from the time of its

Figure 1. Mapping. 2010.
creation and each piece became a physical manifestation of my emotional state. *Mapping* was the first piece of my first semester. I was focused on creating containers of memory. I concentrated on the connections of one memory to the next, creating a map or physical diary, as a way to help me reflect.

It was during my “newfound” understanding of the body's importance and my need for creating signs and symbols, that I decided to approach my work in a new way, or rather, a more familiar way. My background in fashion design began to guide my studio practice more than I had ever intended. I began drafting patterns, sewing at the machine and utilizing my knowledge of costume history and fashion theory. Suddenly, I was using fashion in a new way, not as a functional and well designed object that was to be marketed and sold, but as a medium for my own self expression. Looking towards the raw emotions felt by the human body, I would then begin to create physical representations of these mental states, while referencing the body and its history with fashion.

**Fashion as Communication**

How does one begin to express loss? As I found myself on a quest to answer this question through my work, I turned to the Victorians for my answers. What is the color of loss? The size of loss? The shape of loss? As I started answering these questions, I began to remember the striking photographs of Victorian women, with their all black clothing, their bustles accentuating the void of their curves, their heads veiled with yards of black crape and their faces somber in

![Figure 2. Parents with Second Stage Mourning Clothes. Circa 1847.](image)
appearance. These women were mourning the loss of their children, husbands, friends and family, and they were abiding by the rigid social rituals of mourning dress in 19th century America. As a way of honoring the deceased and expressing the trauma of their loss, women were obliged to veil their faces while seen in public. It was a ritual made fashionable by Queen Victoria after the death of her beloved Prince Albert in 1861. She remained in deep mourning, strictly adorning herself in black garments and variations of a widow's cap, until her own death in 1901. During a time of mourning, the veil became a part of a Victorian woman's silent communication, a symbol to the outside world of her personal grief. The veil acted as her armor, protecting her and serving as a visual clue.¹

The history of this ritual, helped me to lay the foundation for my first large-scale project, which I titled Loss. I began by creating an eight-foot tall, black, veiled bustle; the bustle became a perfect symbol of loss, as its shape could accentuate the void and hollowness of this emotion. During the construction of Loss, I took refuge in its structure, using it as a place to escape, contemplate, accommodate and mourn my own loss. I allowed this cage to become a form of

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psychological entrapment, separating the body and mind from its surroundings, while still creating the comfort and security of a womb. It was a space for reflection. The enormous bustle-like structure consumed its environment, veiled the loss within, and implied the presence of the body.

My formal introduction to this social ritual, and the theory that dress and clothing can serve as a means of communication, was a very significant encounter within my studio practice and a theory that would later direct my use of underpinnings, lace and hair.

**Underpinnings**

When defined by fashion terminology, underpinnings are described as female undergarments, objects that create stability and give shape to the overall costume. They are a foundation - a support. Bustles, crinolines, corsets and panniers are all examples of historical underpinnings. As I continued my research of 19th century costume, I began to have a better understanding of the significant role these objects would play in a woman's everyday life. And so, it was most natural that underpinnings would eventually begin to “support” the subject matter of my work. I became quite interested in the idea that objects like the corset and the bustle (specifically those of the Victorian era) were objects that could offer a physical support for women, a familiar embrace that could protect their fragile emotional states.

During my research, I was continuously shocked by the corsets used by women during pregnancy. Rather than accommodating the pregnant belly, the corset was used in hopes of maintaining a womanly figure and allowed only additional side lacing, in an

Figure 5. Maternity/Nursing Corset. Circa 1900.
attempt at having the corset grow with the belly. These striking objects directly inspired the creation of my own pregnancy corset, which would be the start of my series, *Exposed: An Armory of Physical Longings*. In constructing this series of six corsets, I began to investigate the idea of body armor, while creating an imaginary wardrobe that would serve to protect and accommodate women in both their bodily processes and their mental states. The corsets are uniforms that provide strength and empowerment, because they send out an implicit message, indicating the woman's state of being. She finds comfort and security in the idea of wearing them, because they speak of her desires and struggles. They seek beauty in her burdens. The corsets are informed by me: my desires, my longings, my body and my need for the unquestioned and the unspoken understanding. It is a fantasy wardrobe that embraces and protects me as it seeks the beauty in my burdens.

The series references prototypes of the fashion industry; using the standard size 8 dress form to provide fit and form for each of the sewn pieces. This, along with the use of muslin, is used to express the potential in their wearability and showcases their potential of being produced. I also
reference the historical use of trapunto in quilting and in body armor; all commonly used techniques in European quilts and soft armor from the middle ages, that served to protect and comfort those in need.

The corsets are architectural facades that hint at their interior; architectural skins that prepare a woman for battle. They are the suspension cables that support and raise the fragile foundation; bridges that speak of the past and the present to guide the timeless conversation of womanhood.

Lace

“Lace. The word conjures visions of gossamer bridal veiling, dainty trim on a christening gown, frothy negligees, and exotic lingerie. Lace has sumptuously adorned the mansions of the wealthy, and modestly veiled the windows of the humble. It has spurred fashion, and looked to history; inspired paper doilies, and iron railings; symbolized wealth, and signified social climbing. Perhaps the most impractical of all fabrics, it flaunts fashion over function, and fragility over substance. As it veils, it also reveals, offering itself as a symbol of purity...and of sexual allure.” 2

Lace is a complete and utter dichotomy; it reveals and conceals, it speaks of virginity while simultaneously implying sex. It is beautiful, yet gluttonous in its ornamental overindulgence. Lace offers the perfect combination of metaphor and aesthetic interest, which is the reason for its significance in the content of my work.

After committing myself to this material and slowly beginning to understand the diversity of its content, it was hard to forget a conversation I had with my priest, Canon Matthew

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Talarico, about a particular lace being worn about his vestments. He explained to me that this particular lace was a part of his rochet; a linen tunic, knee length, with tight sleeves and white in color. Each sleeve is cuffed with lace and lined with colored silk to distinguish the priest's ecclesiastical order. Canon Talarico's blue silk cuffs are an indicator of his involvement with the order of priests from the “Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest.” Blue had been determined by the order's influence and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Francis de Sales, a saint often depicted and easily recognized by his blue choir dress. He continued to explain to me that this particular rochet had been purchased from an antique store in Italy, and that lace atop vestments and within the church is a symbol or reminder of the beauty to be encountered upon entering Heaven.

Attending Mass at the Institute in Chicago is what originally peeked my interest in priestly vestments and religious dress. Historically, the textiles being used during the traditional Latin Mass were/are still carefully considered, each embellishment beautifully handcrafted. The priests and altars are dripping with lace, fine linens and rich velvets. Every color used within the vestments has great significance in the meaning of the Mass. Black vestments symbolize death and are worn during funerals and during the solemn liturgy on Good Friday. Purple vestments represent sorrow and penitence, and are used during the Advent and Lenten seasons. White

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vestments symbolize joy, purity and innocence, and are worn while celebrating the Masses of Easter, Christmas and Ascension. Red symbolizes blood and is worn while celebrating Mass on the feast day of a martyred saint and is also worn by Cardinals of the Catholic Church. It is precisely this striking red color and the abundance of cloth that first drew my attention to the Cappa Magna. Meaning “great cape” because of the extreme length of its train, the cappa magna is worn by cardinals and bishops during processions or while attending the Mass. This powerful vestment, with its ability to consume its surroundings, has become a reference and format continuously utilized in my work. This format, in all its drama and opulence, comes to symbolize burden and accumulation within my work.

**Hair**

Hair speaks of modesty, ritual, loss, sensuality and nostalgia. It is a container of memory and emotion, a tangible time-line with the ability to root the past to the present. It is a potent symbol of death, grief, mourning and penitence. It speaks for us; it can express our state of being, our race, our age, our class and our cultural expectations. It has become a universal language that can be understood throughout centuries. Historically, neglected, disheveled and unbound hair was a sign of mourning and penance, a physical representation of one's sin and sorrow. Long flowing hair was a burden that reminded one of their grief, their loss and their untainted past. The Victorians utilized the hair of their newly deceased loved ones in mourning

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jewelry, as a way to commemorate their death. Their brooches, lockets, fobs and bracelets functioned as tangible memories of the fleeting moments associated with love and life. They became fetish objects, “proof of the supernatural continuation of the physical body after death.5”

The images of Mary Magdalene show some of the most powerful examples of hair and its relevance to the act of penance. She has been depicted for centuries in Christian iconography as a penitent woman. Whether she was portrayed weeping at the feet of crucified Jesus, or sitting in isolation next to a flame and a skull, or being carried by angels who were to nourish her with celestial food, she was consistently shown with her long-flowing locks of golden-red hair. Often, the hair is shown overwhelming her entire body which begins to act as a hair cloth or cilice; a historical garment often worn by penitents, made from a rough material to irritate the flesh and to act as a symbol of self-mortification.

According to the story of Mary Magdalene, she was converted and “healed of evil spirits and infirmities,”6 and “serves in many ways as the Virgin Mary's alter ego.”7 Unveiled, and most often adorned only by her head's crowning glory, her womanly curves still dominate her silhouette. Her sexual nature and allure is wholly opposite to the depictions of the Virgin Mary, who is veiled, draped in layers of garments and known for her eternal virginity and her Immaculate Conception.

My interest in penance, reflection and reconciliation is what lead to Magdalene's

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6 Luke 8:3 KJV
appearance in my studio. She was the perfect symbol to express my own struggles and need for penitential contemplation. Early on in my graduate career, I began using a coated copper wire to create the containers for my piece *Mapping*. It was by happy accident that I found this wire, in it's “vintage bronze” coating, to have an uncanny resemblance to my own hair, once I allowed it to hang freely. After three semesters of exploration and research, I finally found a way to use this transformative material to express the subjects used in my work. My goal was to create a large-scale head of hair titled *Magdalene*. *Magdalene* has manifested herself in my studio, standing 9ft tall, with the locks of hair measuring 15 feet in length. The 60 pound head of hair is the ultimate burden and act of self mortification.

![Figure 11: Magdalene. 2012.](image1)

![Figure 12: Magdalene (detail). 2012](image2)

**Veiling**

In studying religious dress and while attending the Tridentine Mass, I began to realize the significance of the veil in ritual and in ceremony. To this day, it is customary for women to
veil themselves during the Mass, or upon entering the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. It is important to note that every sacred object within the Church is veiled, the tabernacle which contains the Holy Eucharist, the altar cloth which symbolizes the shroud of crucified Jesus and the heads of female parishioners. As St. Paul said, “but if a woman nourish her hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering.”

Hair in and of itself can act as a veil, and while it is the glory of the woman's head, it is not the glory in which we focus on during the celebration of the Mass. For women to veil themselves is an act of humility, a way to “remove their sexuality from display.”

“Greeks saw hair as a means of temptation. Medusa's hair was transformed from beautiful strands to threatening snakes, symbolizing negatively the allure of a woman's tresses.”

It is because of reasons such as this that nuns have historically “offered [their hair] as a sacrifice to God, symbolizing a pledge of chastity. It is a ceremony reminiscent of early Greek pagans, who cut off their hair as a sacrificial act. Many orders continue to employ a symbolic cutting of a lock of hair at the profession ceremony,” before donning the veil and becoming the bride of Christ.

Figure 13. Hair cutting and profession of vows. Order of Poor Clares.

8 Corinthians 11:15
Chapter 2

Influences of Nineteenth Century Literature

My curiosity about the nineteenth century began at a young age, when I spent time in antique stores and at auctions with my father. Bizarre photographs, clothing and furniture were found in these places of wonder and within the walls of my dad's turn-of-the-century home. I reluctantly fell asleep in the spooky chambers of his house, surrounded by the artifacts from these eras. I was a frequent visitor to historic homes and cemeteries in Kentucky, and I actually lived next to a Confederate cemetery in Pewee Valley, in my youth. The images of ornate Victorian architecture, funerary customs and macabre daguerreotypes have suddenly became a subtle part of my current visual vocabulary.

In early adolescence, our English and literature classes had us reading classics from the great Romantic writers of the Victorian era. Key figures like Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe became a particular fascination of mine, and a fascination shared by my Grandmother. She shared these Gothic tales with me from her very own bookshelves and we discussed their literary themes in detail during our visits with one another.

Recently I decided to hunt through my own bookshelf, for an old text book that I picked up from a library discard stack, The American Experience: Fiction. I was looking for one of my favorite stories, A Rose for Emily by William Faulkner, when I ran across a short story titled The Minister's Black...
Veil by Nathaniel Hawthorne. This seemed like a rather significant coincidence, as Penitence, my large scale (250 yards of black tulle and handmade lace) veil was sitting in the FAB gallery of the VCU Fine Arts Building. The Minister’s Black Veil is a story that follows the life of a protestant minister, Mr. Hooper, who decides to place over his face, a black veil for the remainder of his life. Donning this veil became an act of penance and a punishment for his own sins. Despite the gossiping townspeople, disgruntled congregation and the pleads of his beloved Elizabeth, he refused to remove the veil. Even upon his deathbed Mr. Hooper refused, and he was eventually buried in the moist earth with his black crape veil still in place. The veil became a very literal sign and signifier of the guilt he felt over his secret sins and vices. Through his dress, he was able to utilize the veil to communicate his message and be a reminder to this New England town, that they too were deeply wrought with sins and imperfection. The creation of the piece Penitence stemmed directly from my need to create a tangible representation of grief. It became a reminder of my imperfections, and a symbol of the stain and accumulation of my own sins.

The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde was originally intended to be a relaxing read, something to take my mind off the intensity of graduate school. Little did I know what an influence it would become on the ideas in my current body of work. In the story, Dorian Gray, a young, handsome man, has his portrait painted by an artist and friend, Basil Hallward. When Dorian sees his own beauty captured in this portrait, he makes a fleeting wish to remain as young
and attractive as he is in this stunning painting, while the figure in the portrait is the one to age with time. To Dorian's dismay, he realizes that this halfhearted wish has come true, when years later he begins to recognize the features of his face morphing on the surface of the painted canvas.

After years of living a shameful life and removing himself from the doting Basil Hallward, the duo have one last meeting at Dorian's home. During this meeting Basil is shocked by Dorian's youthful appearance in comparison to the awful gossip surrounding Dorian. Basil explains to Dorian,

"Mind you, I don't believe these rumors at all, at least, I can't believe them when I see you. Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk of secret vices. There are no such things as secret vices. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the molding of his hands, even."\(^{10}\)

This quote inspired the creation of my series, *Examination of Conscience*. In this series, I began to explore areas of my face where my own vice becomes visible. In hopes of concealing these physical representations of sin from my face, I choose to veil myself in handmade white lace veils.

Each veil was customized to fit perfectly over specific burdened areas, creating a physical armor to protect and prevent the accumulation of sin. These veils act as an imaginary cleansing, as they aid in my longing for purification and absolution.

*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, was my most recent reading. It is a classic tale with some of the most well known literary characters. It is a short story narrated by Mr. Utterson, an English attorney who follows the curious movements of his friend Dr. Jekyll and the doctor's bizarre lab assistant, Mr. Hyde. After the anticipation builds for the majority of this macabre tale, the storyline suddenly ruptures. We discover Dr. Jekyll's wild confessions of the ongoing struggle with his own alter ego, Mr. Hyde, who has manifested himself as a result of the Doctor's experimental tincture. This tale peeked my interest because of my own curiosity over the constant struggle between good and evil, and the dual nature of our own beings. The themes used within the Romantic style of this era have had remarkable influence over my studies and will continue to be a major source of inspiration in the future.
Chapter 3

The Effects of a General Confession

There is a set of beautiful, blue rosary beads that have been following me over the past several years. Found amongst the costume jewelry of my deceased grandmother Mezzy, unwanted and abandoned in each of the previous attempts that my family had made to divide her possessions. And even still, in this latest attempt, with all the women in my family making their selections of cameos, wildly beaded earrings and colorful wooden bangles, they once again moved the plastic baggie aside that contained the rosary and a thin gold wrist watch, adorned by a blue cross. This baggie was my only selection from the tangled mess of beads and chains that day. That rosary found me for a reason. Less than a year later (the Easter of 2010) I began attending the Tridentine Mass regularly, while the Virgin-Mary-blue rosary began to provide a prevalent strength for me.

September 29th, 2011 was the day of my baptism, my first confession, my first penance and my confirmation into the Catholic faith. September 29th is only three days after my birthday, 6 days after Mezzy's birthday and it falls on the feast day of St. Michael the Archangel (the prince and protector of the Catholic Church.) On this day I took the new baptismal and confirmation name of Mary Ursula, as a way to honor not only the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, but also as a way to honor both my great grandmother, Mary Leona and my grandmother, Mary Helen. Ursula, because she is the protector of young women, students and lacemakers.

After summer classes with my priest, Fr. Talarico, at the Shrine of Christ the King on Chicago's South Side, I was asked to begin an examination of conscience in preparation for my
very first confession, otherwise known as a general confession. An examination of conscience is a series of questions, that one is to ask themselves before any confession and at the end of each day. Traditional Catholics are encouraged to examine their conscience as often as possible in order to give an honest confession, to be absolved from their sins and to properly receive Holy Communion. It is a process that brings to light past thoughts, words and deeds, an inspection that is made in order to discover the disunion of your actions with the moral law. I had my entire life, 26 years of sin to take note of and to confess in front of Fr. Talarico and God in the confessional that day.

After reading through the examination of conscience and remembering very carefully each of my mortal sins, I began to see myself and human nature in a very new light. My renewed moral consciousness made me much more aware of my faults, my struggle with good and evil, and the dichotomy of my own being. These questions that I ask myself each day, are now questions that plague my thoughts and the themes in my most current work.

That day, at the end of my confession, I received my first penance. A penance that would be done on that very set of beautiful blue rosary beads.

Figure 20. Mezzy's Rosary Beads.
Loss and Mourning

Let's jump back to November of 1994, with me as a young girl, sitting in the backyard of my Kentucky childhood home. My best friend Peanut and I are outside, contemplating life while the adults, my Mother, Aunt and Grandmother are in the house discussing funeral plans for my Great Grandmother. Mary Leona Ferling Sheridan has just passed away at the age of 88. And I'm outside explaining to Peanut, out of my own grief, that I will have to wear black to her funeral.

I did wear black to her funeral that day, and I wept the entire time. This was my first encounter with the death of a loved one.

Jump to early 2005, I'm in the midst of my studies, as a fashion student in Chicago. I finally get the call I knew was coming, but was not ready to hear. My Mother begins to explain to me that my beloved Grandmother Mezzy, has finally passed. She had properly received her last rites from a Catholic priest in her own home, with her loved ones and her blue rosary beads nearby. The same blue rosary beads that I carry in my purse to this very day. The same blue rosary beads that got me through my first confession. She was only 68. She was my role model, my inspiration and is now my muse.

Jump to only a few months later. When I get the second phone call that I had been expecting, but dreading to hear. This time my Mother begins to explain that my childhood friend, my bearded-border-collie-mutt of a best friend, Peanut has also passed. She was 15 and it was finally time for her to rest in peace.

It is then no surprise that I continue mourning the loss of these beloved figures in my life. They were the ones who helped shape who I am and how I view the world. My work and the
expression of loss is inseparable from my own memories and experiences. The historical research, the process of making and the objects are a way for me to flesh out my own grief and to continue to honor my loved ones, while I struggle with the idea of mortality.

Good & Evil: The Alter Ego

Reading books like *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Dr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have certainly provoked my interest in the idea of an alter ego, but not as much as being provoked by the questions of good and evil in self examination. Certainly the struggle behind all moral dilemmas, is based on the foundation of this question; what is right and what is wrong? How does one live a moral life without the stain of sin and regret, when the nature of our being is so divided? The issue of morality and the struggle between what is right and what is wrong are major ideas which influence my work. Whether religious or secular, no human experience can escape the issues associated with morality, it is a universal dilemma and one of the ultimate shared experiences.

*Bound: Reflections of the Self* is a photographic series that investigates the idea of an alter ego. These photographs explore themes of good and evil and our inseparable relationship with the dichotomy of these conditions. In this series, my hair has come to represent an uncomfortable binding of
one's self to one's alter ego, while also serving as an act of penance and self mortification.

**Sin, Absolution and Penance**

The story of the fall of man and the origin of 'original sin', was developed around the story of Adam and Eve and Eve's disobedience and inability to resist temptation. An uncleanness of body and soul, regret over bad choices and the need for cleansing and punishment are ideas that have plagued humans for millenia. Calling to mind my own sins, reflecting upon my faults, asking for forgiveness and absolution, and completing acts of penance, has now become a major part of my life. These sacraments help me in my quest for a moral life, and in my longing for perfection. Since that day on September 29th, my work has begun to reflect these ideas.

*Act of Contrition* is a video piece that highlights this fall, our struggle with imperfection. The veiled mouth, focuses on a site of imperfection, the water is a symbol of cleansing, and the fall of the lace portrays our struggle.

![Still shot from Act of Contrition](image)

*Figure 23. Still shot from Act of Contrition. (00:03:52). 2012.*

**Ritual**

Acts of ritual are often used in attempts to better one's self, to understand the mysteries of life, to cleanse and to purify. They are understood through their symbolic value. Dressing
oneself, shaking hands, funeral customs, religious ceremony, beauty rituals, processions and prayer are all associated with significant rites of passage. In the altered state of consciousness that results from these acts, we hope for renewal, unity and transformation.

*Perpetual Adoration* is a video piece that refers to the ritualistic act of prayer. Within the video, the lace glove aids and supports this ritual. By inserting both hands into this singular lace glove, I want to speak of unity; and the reconciliation of two divided parts. Both hands work to portray the duality of body and soul, right and wrong, good and evil; while the glove provides for a ceremonial communion. The confinement of this unity hints at our struggle, our need for punishment and for self examination. The glove is the embodiment of my obligatory act of penance.

*Extreme Unction* has been informed by the last rights kits used by priests in making their house calls to the homes of the sick. These kits contain all the necessary objects to anoint the sick in their final days or hours before death, and to cleanse them of their sins. This sacrament is called Extreme Unction. This cabinet
becomes a home for the *Examination of Conscience* veils and is surrounded by handcrafted objects made to assist in the imagined ritual of this examination and cleansing. A porcelain bowl, a glass cruet, a muslin handkerchief and a mirror indicate the processes of this fictional ritual, while taking clues from those of which we are already familiar.

Figure 26. *Extreme Unction* (detail), 2012.

Figure 27. *Extreme Unction*, 2012.
Chapter 4

Studio Practice

Artist as Influence

It was during my time at VCU that I became acquainted with a number of contemporary artists who began to inspire and influence my work and my studio practice. Probably the most influential, were those artists who came to VCU to give artist lectures.

I had only recently discovered Janine Antoni's work, when I learned that she would be coming to VCU during the Fall of 2010. Getting to hear her speak so eloquently about her work and so casually in front of an entire auditorium of students and professors, was a memorable experience. Her lecture began as she introduced us to her first piece outside of graduate school and ended with her dancing freely in front of the podium, her arms and hair flailing in every direction. Her energy was palpable. Seeing her create a linear story out of her diverse body of work was incredible and truly inspiring. Her use of the body's senses and her themes of motherhood and transformation all respectfully pay homage to her Catholic imagination.11

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Anne Wilson, who's work I had always admired, also came to speak at VCU. She came in the fall of 2011 through the Craft/Material studies department and had studio visits with a number of the graduate students. I was one of them. Her use of lace, hair and weaving have continued to capture my imagination and inspire my making. It is also her use of materials and techniques as symbols, that have inspired the way I use materials as symbols in my own practice. I was exhilarated after our studio visit that day. It was an amazing experience as a young artist to have my artistic role model casually sitting in my studio, bearing down on my work and challenging me with just the right questions.

Now, it may seem odd to begin talking about Barnett Newman as a major influence, but it is not as far-fetched as it seems. In the spring of 2011, I had the privilege of studying with Dr. Robert Hobbs, art historian extraordinaire, in his traveling Abstract Expressionism class. As I looked through the long list of artworks that we would see throughout our travels and made a decision about the topics of my presentation, I chose Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. Obviously my Catholic background and the timing of Lent played into this decision. The work of the abstract expressionists and especially that of

Barnett Newman was mainly a mystery to me. The structure of the class, our readings and my presentation topic allowed me to dive right into this prolific American art movement and to get to know Barnett Newman's work on a more personal level. In reading through copies of his own writings and seeing the chronology of his life via the Barnett Newman Foundation website, I learned pretty quickly that he had a history of working in the New York garment district, helping to run his father's menswear company. I had noted that the notorious vertical stripes used in his work were often referred to as “zips.” He utilized this device as a way to both divide and unite the canvas, much like a zipper does with cloth on a garment. It is hard, as an artist with a background in fashion, to not make a connection between his own history with fashion and his use of the term “zip.” His Jewish background, his references to figures of the Old Testament, his interest in the sublime and his dabbling in Catholic ideas showed me how my own history and deep rooted questions of spirituality could influence my own work.

As a result of numerous studio visits and critiques with VCU professors, visiting artists and my graduate peers, I have been introduced to a large number of emerging contemporary
artists around the US. It is because of our use of the body, fashion and historical references that people have repeatedly made connections between my work and those of Stephanie Liner and Lauren Kalman.

![Image](image1.jpg)
Figure 31. Stephanie Liner. *Momentos of a Doomed Construct.*

![Image](image2.jpg)
Figure 32. Lauren Kalman. *Lip Adornment.* 2006.

**Process and Devotions**

It has become very clear to me how influential my background in fashion design has become to my studio practice and the processes I employ as an artist. Just as with any fashion designer, I start by gathering my inspiration, for me this has usually meant reading literature and researching the history of art and costume. I then create a wall of inspiration, a mood board if you will, to hold technical samples, material explorations and magazine clippings. Much like the industry, I get ideas out on paper with quick sketches or even with technical specs; which include important notes on size, material and construction methods. I then begin my creation of paper patterns and with sewn samples, until each piece is perfectly fitted and technically executed. I love this planning process, the challenge of patterning and the meticulous nature of machine and hand sewing.
I still find that I am most happy with a needle and thread in hand, which is perhaps why I am so drawn to making garments and lace. The repetitive and penitential process become a metaphor for my longing to find perfection and purification. My making provides a sense of control, a freedom from my preoccupations and a way to repent. My imagination leads me to create my own world of wonder, a place of security, a world that relieves the anxieties of my burdens. My use of video, photography and installation work to provide a unique experience for the viewer, for here they are invited to enter these imaginary worlds of wonder. My devotion to my materials, my reverence for tradition, and my perpetual yearning for rootedness and unity with history, are all a means of discovery that drive the conceptual development of my work.

My interest in lace increased right before entering graduate school. My intention was to learn lacemaking techniques during my time at school, and to become deeply versed in its history. Over time, I have felt an obligation to learn lacemaking techniques, as I fear it is a traditional craft that will soon become extinct. It seems to have not engaged the younger generation of makers. I searched for a year before I could find someone (who was in the right place, at the right time) to introduce me to the technique of bobbin lacemaking. A retired German woman with a serious bobbin lacemaking hobby taught me the basics and got me started with my first set of supplies. It was also through her and the women in her guild, that I became aware of the annual International Old Lacemakers convention that takes place each summer. So in August of 2011, I made my way to Bethesda, MD to attend the convention and to take three courses in the topics of lace identification, lester lace (a type of bobbin lacemaking) and teneriffe lacemaking. I left that long convention week realizing two things. First and foremost (with just a taste of technique) I was now wholeheartedly devoted to this craft, the second thing I realized
was that my age demographic was severely under represented.

Knowing my dedication to this craft and my passion for teaching, it is in my interest to not only utilize these techniques in my studio, but also in the classroom. Through my work and that of my future students, I hope to revive interest in lacemaking history and provide innovation in its techniques and in its functionality.

Ite, Missa Est

My dismissal draws nigh.

As I look back over these past two years, I am quite literally shocked by myself and by my work. How did I get here? And how do I conclude? Putting a period at the end of this intensely long-run-on-sentence-of an experience, is no easy task.

But one thing is clear. This graduate school experience has brought me and my work to full fruition. What comes next is the ripening. The soil is rich, the roots are grounded and the fruits are plentiful.

As I conclude, it is important that the viewer understand my intentions. I am not looking to educate the clueless, to pass judgments on one's faith or point an omniscient finger. I am not making political commentary about the Catholic Church or demeaning the significance of the rituals and religious ceremonies. I am simply using these potent symbols in my work to guide the conversation of morality, which focuses on the duality of human nature, and includes my own longing for purification.
Bibliography


List of Figures


St. Mary Magdalene, polychrome wood, sculpture, end of the 14th century(?), Church of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, Toruń, Poland. Web. 19 April 2012.

Curriculum Vitae

April Dauscha
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EDUCATION

Virginia Commonwealth University
MFA: Craft/Material Studies - Fiber
Expected Graduation: May 2012

International Academy of Design & Technology
BFA: Fashion Design
June 2006

EXHIBITIONS

2012  Underneath it All: Desire, Power, Memory & Lingerie,
The Textile Center, Minneapolis, MN, scheduled for July 2012
Cotuit Center for the Arts, Cape Cod, MA, scheduled for February 2013

Virginia Commonwealth University MFA Thesis Exhibition, Anderson Gallery,
Richmond, VA, scheduled for May

New Waves 2012, Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, Virginia Beach, VA, Juried
Exhibition by Lane Relyea

Outside/Inside the Box: FiberPhiladelphia 2012, Crane Arts, Philadelphia, PA, Juried
Exhibition by Bruce Hoffman

Fears & Phobias, Target Gallery, Torpedo Factory, Alexandria, VA, Juried Exhibition by
Lea Newman

ON/OFF, FAB Gallery, VCUarts, Richmond, VA, Juried Exhibition by Craft/Material Studies
Faculty

2011  Day One: The Early Protagonist, MFA Candidacy Exhibition, ART6 Gallery, Richmond, VA

2010  Thread Loves Paper, Sonoma Valley Public Library, Sonoma, CA

AWARDS

2012  Graduate Teaching Assistant, Virginia Commonwealth University, (Fall 2010, Fall 2011
and Spring 2012)
VCU School of the Arts Research Grant, Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU School of the Arts Travel Grant, Virginia Commonwealth University

2011  William B. Clopton Scholarship, Virginia Commonwealth University
Mid-Atlantic Needlework Retail Association Scholarship, Virginia Commonwealth
University

2006  Cum Laude, International Academy of Design and Technology

2004  Honorable Mention Sophomore Design Award, International Academy of Design and
Technology
TEACHING

Virginia Commonwealth University
Adjunct Faculty: Art Foundations: Project – Fiber  Richmond, VA  Spring 2012
Adjunct Faculty: Pattern Weaving  Summer 2011
Team Taught: Art Foundations: Project – Fiber  Spring 2011
Graduate Teaching Assistantship: Pattern Weaving  Spring 2012 & 2011
Graduate Teaching Assistantship: Ancient Peruvian Textile Techniques  Fall 2010

International Academy of Design and Technology
Adjunct Faculty: Clothing Construction I  Chicago, IL  Winter & Spring Quarter 2010
Adjunct Faculty: Textiles for Fashion Design  Winter Quarter 2010
Teacher’s Assistant: Textile Design  Summer & Fall Quarter 2009

INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE

1154 LILL STUDIO – The Original Custom Handbag Company
Design Associate  December 2007 - December 2009
During this time I contributed to product development through CAD pattern drafting, sample sewing, training in-house sewers, creating spec sheets, and managing the new releases schedule.
I also contributed to cost conservation methods by revamping products to meet their profit margins and I was the designer for one of LILL’s top selling and most profitable handbags, The Brianna.

Parts Department Associate  September 2006 – December 2007
While working in the Parts Department, I was in charge of preparing the hardware/trims for each handbag order, in preparation for contractor sewing and quality control. I also managed and implemented inventory counting processes and supply ordering methods while attending weekly production meetings.

Chicago Shakespeare Theater
Freelance Costume Shop Stitcher  Chicago, IL  June 2006 - September 2006
Costume Shop Intern  Spring 2006

CONFERENCES ATTENDED

The 58th annual International Old Lacemakers, Inc. Convention  Bethesda, MD, August 2011
Classes in Bobbin Lace (Lester), Teneriffe Needle Lace and Lace Identification

DOCUMENTATION OF WORK

**TRAVEL**

**Guatemala Textile Tour**, Antigua, Guatemala, Indigo Artes Textiles y Populares, 2/28/10 - 3/8/10
Classes in Backstrap Loom Weaving and Introduction to Jaspe (Ikat)

**SKILLS**

- Textile Construction: Weaving, Felting, Quilting, Lace making & Basket making
- Surface Design: Screen Printing, Shibori, Dyeing, Trapunto, Embroidery & Beading
- Sewing Construction, Draping & Pattern Drafting
- Fashion Illustration & Flat Drawing
- Illustrator, Photoshop, SnapFashun & CAD programs
- Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint & Outlook