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Reflections of Self

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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REFLECTIONS OF SELF

By Melissa Athey, MFA

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

Major Director: Jack Wax
Professor, Craft and Material Studies Department, School of the Arts

I vacillate between all extremes, beauty vs. ugly, internal vs. external, micro vs. macro. It is these disparate notions that inspire what I make. We cannot ever see ourselves objectively, but does that mean we shouldn’t try? This thesis is my attempt to dissect what I did created in my two years at Virginia Commonwealth University, my exploration of the illness within and the psychological nature of how we go about hiding our insecurities.
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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As to this thesis, I must thank my committee. Also, though she may never know just how much, Sarah Brieland helped me through the last year and has provided me with empathy and understanding that I am forever grateful for. Sarah convinced me I was not crazy and that my work was valid and actually good. She restored my faith in what I was doing.

Finally, despite my filthy mouth and often lack of faith, I am thankful that God has given me the chance to do what I do. Now I just have to figure out the rest…
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Introduction

My journey to graduate school is just a continuation of my journey through life. I do not know what will come after (although I have hopes) but I am aware of what came before. At the very least I know how I came to be writing this thesis; in so much as any of us can understand our machinations and those of others that have gone into creating our story. Furthermore, as all art is about life, my art is about my life. It is how I deal with, process, and move through the happenings of my existence.

I came to VCU with a self-taught understanding of glass and a background in painting and fiber. My glasswork was mostly concerned with biomorphically inspired sculptures. I had fibers work that diverged from that focused inquiry, but for the most part that was the basis of my art. It was imperceptively autobiographical and I wasn’t really aware of why I made the forms that I did, beyond them being my interpretation of the natural and medical world around me. They relate in some way to my father who is a doctor and his desire for me to become a doctor. They are my artist’s interpretation of the science world the rest of my family inhabits. I knew these aspects of my work and was aware of the basic instigant behind what I made. I worked with components. Every piece was highly detailed and labor intensive – a construction of multiple, tiny parts into a single form. I was comfortable with this mode of creating and had tailored my glass casting techniques specifically...
to achieve the level of detail and complexity I wanted. The pieces, while mostly successful didn’t possess the depth of content that I desired.

The statements, “we encourage failure” and “try something new that you have never done before” greatly initiated my first creative forays at VCU. With a faith in my abilities to master and conquer most materials and an idea to create something traditional, but on a topic I had never touched before, I started work on my first piece. Not one that was autobiographical in anyway, but on a topic that was close to my heart and inspired by my cultural heritage and religion.

I left the world of biological systems and microcosms, patterns and natural structures behind for a romp in traditional Catholicism and my Irish heritage. Both things that are important to me. As a work of art, the piece was an utter failure. It was overly ambitious (even for me) and it left me frustrated and overwhelmed. I lacked the network of artists, laborers, and people with technical knowledge that I had come to rely on in Colorado. It focused on subject matter that suffered from being both too broad in terms of topic (thousands of years of history), and too narrow in that it couldn’t be understood by the average viewer. The biggest problem though, was that I wasn’t emotionally invested in the work.

It took too long to make and I had far too many technical difficulties that I couldn’t overcome quickly. The form I chose was intended to mimic the recent unearthing of an eight-sided church that had been built on a concept of celebrating Mass in the round. Unfamiliar with the landscape of the coast, I didn’t recognize, until it was pointed out to me, that the piece also looked remarkably like a lighthouse. A
lighthouse was a visual aesthetic that I had no desire to draw upon. I wished to create a votive alter (integral to the Catholic faith) and draw upon the nature of reliquaries and preserved saints. The center heart, located within the reliquary represented the sacred heart of Jesus. I rusted the outer steel structure to appear as if tears were running down the base. Unfortunately, given my lack of experience within the glass community I was unaware that a glass heart was something people had made way too many times and it read as trite, and anything but sacred. The biggest problem (beyond my unfortunate use of cliché imagery) was that despite my ties to Catholicism and other aspects of that piece, my true interests, aesthetics, process, and otherwise, were in line with and far closer to the work I was creating before I came to VCU. With this thought, I began to look back at what I was making before I came to VCU and the true impetus behind those creations. It was not the surface aspects that I was already aware of, but the deeper reasons behind why I was making the forms that I had. Why it was that I spent so much time piecing together small natural objects to form larger creations. Why was I was constantly building and reforming objects into other structures and why I was so tied to the process of piecing together fragments of one form in order to create another.
A History

But, I digress…I was born under relatively normal circumstances; I have a mom and a dad. My brother (of the same mother and father) followed me a few years later and we have always been close. My father the doctor raised me on stories of his exploits in his medical residency and following medical practice and it is fair to say I thought he was the most amazing person in the world. My mother, a businesswoman, raised us in my father’s absence (they make shows and movies about the grueling all consuming nature of medical residencies). She was in her own right, a busy career women. In the late 80’s and early 90’s my mother was glamorous and beautiful with big blonde hair, light blue eyes painted shades of pink, purple, and turquoise, power suits, and high heels. My brother and I first went to daycare and then became latch key kids. We were uniquely tied together as siblings (after I decided that my parents weren’t taking him back to the hospital) and have always shared a bond.

The most influential change in my life came after my dad finished his residency and we made the move to my mother’s home state of North Dakota. While I spent the ensuing eight years giving my parents endless amounts of grief for moving me, I now view it as the most life altering experience of my childhood. What had previously been an existence that only included my small family unit grew to encompass aunts, uncles, grandparents, and most importantly, cousins. It was an entire family I had not previously known. I found relationships that to this day are everything to me.

The eight following years until I moved away for college are important in terms of my development, but also quite average (if such a thing exists). I went to Catholic schools, had a
tumultuous and rebellious teenage experience where I managed to put my parents through an absurd amount of stress. I acquired another sibling along the way, adopted from the foster care system. In short, good times, bad times, but always loved and cared for. More importantly, I developed close and lasting bonds to my extended family.

When I try to evaluate my art from an objective position, it becomes clear that two themes from my childhood affect it most. First, while it has never once been insinuated that I have not met it, I have an overwhelming need to achieve my father’s approval. The need to receive acknowledgement from the man that can do anything. The man that saves the world on a daily basis and has affected more lives than even 10 people could ever hope to. A man dubbed by his own family to be the “golden boy”. Raised on his stories of saving lives and helping others, to his physical prowess and ability to perform almost any task competently if not flawlessly, I live in the shadow (placed there by myself) of a man who is as brilliant, caring, confident, and amazing as people come. His inability to understand me lies only in the art I create. This is a difficult predicament in that it has become the most important aspect of who I am. In a conversation with Beth Lipman during a studio visit, she mentioned that it seemed like my intense ties to process and need to make things that were so process driven felt like a need to justify myself as an artist. I don’t know if this is true but it seems like the further I go in my studies the more I am inclined to acknowledge that my need to do things in such a tedious and perfecting fashion may be related to my need to find acceptance for my art. Regardless of whether it is or not, process plays a huge part in the act of making for me.

The second most noticeable theme in my life pertains to my health, or lack thereof. I’ve been sick most of my life in one way or another. From an early age, the litany of medical issues looked like the absurd and lengthy list of a hypochondriac. A list of ailments so long it read like
a pharmaceutical company’s potential side effects document for some newfangled drug. A list of maladies that engendered looks of incredulity and had they not been my own, even I would have viewed them with skepticism. Doctors had no explanation and little they could offer in the way of advice. Susan Sontag wrote that, “Theories that diseases are caused by mental states and can be cured by will power are always an index of how much is not understood about a disease.” (Sontag 2001) ^1 While this may be true, when doctors don’t know what’s wrong with a person, and the list of problems is long and expansive, questions into hypochondria and possible mental problems begin to arise quickly. So, despite being constantly sick, having joint pain, stomach pain, horrible headaches, exhaustion and very little stamina, I stopped going to the doctor. Better to deal with my problems on my own than have them thinking I was making up problems for sympathy or attention.

Furthermore, I learned that talking about my health problems made people uncomfortable and so I learned not to talk about them at all. This inability to speak candidly about how my illness has affected me and is still an issue I struggle with today. I learned that pretending to be fine was easier that trying to explain in some vague way that everything was wrong. It wasn’t until years later when I could no longer walk (among a litany of other debilitating issues) that doctors really started to look at my problems seriously. With copious amounts of testing, doctors finally were able to put a name (sort of) to my problems. Fibromyalgia was the first diagnosis although I was told that there was scant amount of research as to a cause or cure but that I should probably register for disability as others with my condition typically were not able to take care of themselves. The doctor then handed me a note for a handicapped parking permit. As to my constant exhaustion, it was labeled Chronic Fatigue, another name given to the broad scope of

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^1 Sontag, Susan. Illness as Metaphor. 2001
ailments I was dealing with. These names did little to explain anything that was wrong with me but did give me a small portal into understanding that there was actually something wrong with me and I wasn’t completely insane. A few years later, I was required to see a Rheumatologist to verify my diagnosis (again another doubting doctor) and he ordered blood work for autoimmune conditions. The result was an incomplete picture, but partial understanding of the cause of my problems. It involved an antibody within my body that fought the nuclei of my own cells. As I was told, “We now know part of the picture of what is wrong with you; we just don’t know what that means.” As a potential treatment I could if I so chose, undergo a round of chemo though… to try to rid my body of the antibodies. There was of course no guarantee that it would work, but it was an option. No suggestions as to potential causes and certainly no answers, but at least I wasn’t insane.

At 26, after the denial of my insurance company to pay for my medicine and the suggestion by my doctor that I see if I had sleep apnea, (because my fingers were clubbed) I had a sleep study done. The results showed that I had narcolepsy. My constant exhaustion and need to sleep were more than Chronic Fatigue. Rather, they were a product of my sleep cycle patterns and the fact that I only entered my non-REM (restorative sleep) half as much or less as a regular person. So, my body constantly destroying itself also lacked the ability to properly restore itself. This started to explain why I never seemed to quite heal and things like bruises lasted years not weeks.

This isn’t a complete medical history by any means, just the short and basic but it is a great deal of what makes me who I am. The hardest thing I do every day is wake up, pulling myself up from the total exhaustion so I can join the rest of the world. There’s medication that helps, but it is expensive as hell, and it doesn’t kick in until a couple of hours after I take it. That
leaves me dragging my ass around, ignoring the urge to collapse back into bed after a vigorous round of teeth brushing or a shower, and fighting the nausea and pain that accompany my exhaustion.

I’ve been told that I deal with my illness quite well. I don’t know if that is true or if it just involves the fact that as I have always been sick, I don’t know what it is like not to be. I didn’t wake up one day and go from being healthy and hale to sick and tired. I didn’t even realize until I was 19 that normal people were not constantly exhausted. I assumed that everyone felt the way I did. Malaise is normal to me, a part of my life that makes up my identity, one that I can’t separate myself from.

And I have tried. I’ve tried every type of treatment. Western medical approaches that had me on eight different prescriptions to chiropractic, ayurvedic, acupuncture, Chinese herbs, exercise, diet, yoga. I’ve tried them all and while I am no longer a borderline cripple, I have accepted that I will never have the energy and stamina that others do. My life will always be rigorously tied to my ability to rest and I’ll never do well with long tasks. My hopes to travel and become a missionary and help people in other countries were abandoned long ago by the reality of my physical situation.

The newest diet or drug, cutting high fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated oils, while they have improved my overall well being, aren’t a cure for what ails me. As excited as I get by the newest promising supplement or vitamin (hoping that it will be the missing link), none have them have been the cure to my predicament. As much as I want to believe that taking sea buckthorn berry is my potential panacea, I am left downtrodden and in the same state I started. I
have only ever gotten better to a point but if I could wish or will my conditions away, I would. In a heartbeat, I’d be out in the world traversing the globe.

As children, we are told that we can be anything, do anything. Anyone can be president, anyone can overcome their situation. This line of thinking is idealistic and unrealistic. There are some things we cannot change, no matter how much we desire to.

ILLNESS, whether it is physical, psychological or spiritual, is often frowned upon in our culture. If you’re not feeling great, you are expected to take steps to clear up the problem. Buy the book promising two dozen foolproof strategies for emotional well-being. Hie thee to a pharmacy, where salves for existential anguish are dispensed by the bushel. TiVo “Oprah.” Eat broccoli, defy cancer.

Or maybe not. The news that a fat-free diet may not significantly reduce heart disease made the nation’s front pages because it came as a disturbing rebuke to the widely held belief that we can be in firm control of our destinies. It blew a raspberry at the notion that the road to physical fitness, psychological health and-hey, you never know- eventual mortality is laid out before us, and only the lazy, the weak or the morally depraved could fail to take it. (Isherwood 2006)²

Sometimes being well isn’t a matter of taking good care of oneself and eating healthy. Sometimes life isn’t that simple.

I no longer fall over when I get out of bed, and can walk to my car on my own. The bones in my ankles and hands are all visible despite the fact that I am 20 lbs. heavier now. I haven’t had a full flare-up in 3 years… that doesn’t mean the threat isn’t always looming over

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² Isherwood, Charles. The Art of Living in an Unfair World. 2006
my head. I’ve improved and I am thankful that unlike many with my condition, I can still function without aid and do most of the things that I need to do. I also have a family that has supported me whenever I have needed any type of assistance. This has made my conditions frustrating but I’ve always had options. I accept that I will probably always have to do things differently and have limitations that others don’t understand. What is far harder to stomach and accept is that others in my family suffer from similar issues. I watch the things they do so they can be normal. The strides they take to try to maintain a level of functionality so they can hold jobs and lead normal lives. Yet, “Epstein reminds us that disease and in its root form as dis-ease is also an expression of malaise and discomfort, with respect to socio-cultural categories of the normal. A sick person is always an outcast to a certain degree.” (Manchester City Galleries 2002)³

Some families and by that right members of certain families will be closer related genetically by chance. Each person acquires genes and genetic material randomly. Thus, certain families will have people that randomly have more genes in common with other family members. My family is one of those families. We look alike, not just my brother and I, but also my cousins. We can pass for siblings and have a great deal in common. In my family, we are not only emotionally close, but we also are genetically similar. Knowing that I suffer from a lifetime of medical maladies is annoying but acceptable, because I have no choice but to accept it. Watching my other family members suffer from problems similar to my own, is far worse. I wouldn’t wish my problems on anyone; I certainly wouldn’t wish them on those people I love the most. While I can accept my restrictions, watching my family struggle with similar ailments

³ Manchester City Galleries. Wim Delvoye: Gothic Works. 2002
is far more difficult to accept. Just as our physical similarities are striking, so too is the similarity of the medical conditions we have.

Returning home for Christmas my first year in Virginia I was moved and inspired by watching my cousin strap herself into a special chair and then use what essentially were tie down straps to ratchet herself in opposite directions against the curvature of her spine. This device, meant to try to straighten out her back and hopefully correct the degree of her scoliosis, was not only time consuming but also painful. She was to use the device three times a day for 45 minutes in hope that by lessening the degree of curvature she could avoid spinal surgery. Along with the chair was a device that she strapped around her head to pull herself upwards and exercises to try to straighten out her back to where she would not need surgery. While all of this sounds extreme, to anyone who has seen the process of spinal surgery, the aftermath, and potential side effects, it becomes understandable. While my cousin’s scoliosis is by far the worst, all of us suffer from it.

I thought about this and how the year before, my 25-year-old brother almost lost two of his toes to a circulatory problem. My brother works harder than anyone I know to stay in shape. He works out twice a day, eats no wheat, no sugar, takes vitamins, supplements, etc. and still he suffers from autoimmune disorders. At 25 he was told he had the feet of an 80-year-old diabetic. Had the toes split open because of the blood pooling in them he would have essentially gotten gangrene and had to have them amputated. Doctors of course have no explanation for this as he should by all accounts have better circulation than most of the general population as a runner. Once again, we all have circulatory issues; it has just manifested itself the worst in my brother. The list goes on and on, for all of us really. Bizarre and random issues, some we have in common, others unique to the individual, all mostly unexplained.
Body, of Work

Years before I had collected glass from a burned down house on some of my aunt’s land in Canada. I was enamored with the way the glass had been twisted and transformed, embedding itself with the ash of the fire. Through the extreme heat and violent effects of a house fire, the glass had been transformed into little globules and cooled in wild organic patterns. Finally, after the house had burned and fallen down on top of it, a reduction atmosphere was created that had left iridescence and subtle colors upon the glass. I was amazed that despite the horrid and tragic nature of a house fire, the small excavated pieces still had aspects of beauty.

I started attaching the glass pieces together with different materials and adhesives. Working in a way that was comfortable to me (piecing and combining) but using pieces that were already formed as opposed to creating a form and then casting a solid singular form from glass as I was so used to. I had to find materials that would blend seamlessly with the glass pieces that I already had and yet were structurally sound and functional binders. The glass I saw needed to be used to make spines. These spinal pieces were
replicas of the spines of my brother, cousin, and I and became the work I titled, *Familial Relations Spinal Curvature Deviation*. I acquired x-rays of each of our backs and used them as templates so the spines I created were representations of how each of our backs is abnormally twisted. Edwin Carels stated that, “Normality is something that can and thus should be measured. The concept of disease is a general scheme for explaining, predicting, and controlling the dimensions of the human condition.” (Manchester City Galleries 2002)\(^d\)

The process of piecing together so many small fragments into a larger unit was cathartic and I began to recognize it as a physical manifestation of how I go about putting together pieces of my life and the things I know. It’s my aesthetic way of materializing the very aspect of how I organize information and the entirety of all things around us. As all things are created and comprised of smaller parts, little to big, atoms, molecules, and cells all fit together to create the larger forms that become everything we see around us. In the same way, words become sentences, which form thoughts and ideas. Everything starts from little and is formed together to make larger things. By piecing and making forms from multiple smaller pieces I am able to act as creator and fit together a puzzle of things that will come together to create a larger form. I make the decision as to what to include and where each piece should go. I become the architect for that form.

I have always felt that glass as a material is imbued with the qualities that are perfect metaphors for what I say in my artwork. As a material, it is delicate and fragile; it breaks easy under stress and hates temperature changes. Yet as a converse aspect, glass is also extremely strong. We build skyscrapers out of it and use it to cover the hulls of space shuttles. Polish it and it has the smoothest surface one can imagine, but break it and it acquires an edge that even the sharpest blade is jealous of. Glass can’t help but be beautiful. Twist it, fire it, change it, and put

\(^{4}\) Ibid.
it through any series of brutal elements (a house fire maybe?) and still there are small spots of iridescence and rainbows. But more than anything, it is enduring. After a civilization is gone and the roads have been reclaimed by the wilds, the bricks have powdered to dust, and all other traces have vanished, an unearthed glass chalice will look the same as it did 3,000 years earlier, testament to the tenacity of this most delicate of materials.

The conditions the glass of the house fire underwent became a perfect allegory for the factors that had caused our spines to twist and curve and the resulting form. Curved and gnarled, the glass had once lived a life as windows, jars, bottles, etc. Subjected to the extreme conditions of the fire, the glass was altered and changed from its original life into a different form but one that was still recognizably glass. Much in the way the spines of my family and I, meant to be straight and functional body parts, had at some point undergone change that had altered them into a different although still recognizable form; a parody of the original. Something altogether different and yet still reminiscent of the form it was intended to be.

Thinking of the twisting and altering that has occurred within each of our backs and bodies in general, I wanted to also depict the way we look from the outside. The fragility of our bodies and the way our external selves show the problems that exist within. I made casts of each of my brother’s, cousin’s, and my back and did a simple tack fuse of crystal clear glass within the forms. This created a sugar-like skin of tiny tack fused glass frit that was extremely delicate and breakable. Within the pieces the
uneven distorted nature of our backs and the evidence of scoliosis could be seen. These pieces, while a very direct cast of each of our backs, require a moment of effort to be understood as a back. They hover lightly in the air, at once reinforcing the curvature of the spine pieces and contrasting the gnarled organic quality with their ethereal and crystalline nature.

This assembly process, the way we go about organizing ourselves and putting back the pieces of our lives after we’ve completely fallen apart was the concept behind my third candidacy piece, Convalescence. In this piece, I made casts of both my legs (the limbs necessary for us to stand on) and sliced them into sections. Each section was fit with an articulated glass cog and hole into which it fit. As each part fit together, it could be articulated in any direction. With this, it became obvious that while one can reassemble themselves after a calamitous event, one cannot ever be the way they were before that event happened. We are forever changed and different. All people fall apart at sometime in their lives, for a variety of reasons, for me, that involved physical maladies, but everyone’s event is of course different. As each experience changes us and gives us infinite variety of ways in which we can “put ourselves back together” so too could the slices of the legs be interchanged and rotated within their setting to any number of different positions. While one leg had been reassembled, the other lay fallen onto
The ravens were for me an anthropomorphic representation of the paradoxical and conflicting elements they are imbued with throughout the differing cultures of the world. I had never sculpted animals in that fashion and was curious to see if I was able to do it. As an animal, the raven held interesting associations culturally although just about every culture has some type of lore concerning them, and I wanted to use an animal that would have multiple meanings at the same time. As a species, the raven, or corvid, is considered to be the most intelligent in the bird kingdom. They have the ability to solve rather complex problems, they mate for life, and are social creatures who care for their families. In myth the raven is often thought of as a trickster and dark prankster. In some Native American cultures the raven is the or associated with the creator of the world, in others it is the handmaiden of death. In Celtic lore the raven takes on the form of prophesy and is associated with the battlefield. In Norse culture, two ravens are the right hands of Odin, one represents thought and the other is memory. The raven is mentioned in the Old Testament, there are also stories that exist in Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism. The raven is also integral in European history for it is said, that if ravens ever leave the tower of London the city will fall. While recent years have seen the raven associated with death, that is only one of the incantations of the lore that surrounds the bird. Knowing all this I chose the raven as a symbol of not only death and destruction but also for its associations in other cultures that I felt strongly pertained to the content I wanted to imbue.
the work with. As a prankster, the raven represents the way we so often feel when everything has fallen apart around us, as if the world has played a horrible joke on us. As a symbol of memory we remember and of course, can in that sense never forget such a time in each of our lives when everything fell apart. As a symbol of death the raven signifies the death of the old life we knew, and as a symbol of creation it alludes to the nature of how we must all put things back together again and begin anew. Depending on a person’s ethnic, social, or historical background would change how they would view the ravens within the work.

After Candidacy I decided to look at the relationships between what was on the inside (a body that was constantly trying to destroy itself) and the external presentation of health and beauty so prevalent within my family. I also saw this as an aspect that was reflected throughout world. The deception that all people, to some degree or another perpetrate. The disguising of what is on the inside and packaging the exterior to appear as something else entirely became my focus.
SweetTooth

I began to think of umbrellas, how they protect and cover us from the elements, much in the same way we cover ourselves with an outer layer to hide what exists within each of us. Whether for safety, self-preservation, deception, etc. we cover our internal selves with a lining. We coat the aspects of who we are in sugary confections to draw the eye away from the beast we contain underneath our skins.

The way we treat the very skin and body within which we reside becomes at both times a reflection of whom we are inside and a diversion we hope others won’t look past. We reflect the environment from which we develop. As an exterior facet of who we are, we decorate ourselves. Modern humans wear makeup and clothes and choose the items with which we cover ourselves for all sorts of different reasons, baggy clothes to conceal weight or tight clothes to emphasize this or that aspect of our physique. Bright colors to drab and neutral, brand names to vintage found items, all mean something different, all chosen for a reason. “Through the artifice of apparel, the less than perfect can camouflage perceived deficiencies and in some instances project and appeal beyond those gifted with characteristics accepted as ideal in their culture or time.” (Koda 2001) 5 The decorating doesn’t stop there. We also physically alter our skin—tattoos, piercings, make-up, plastic surgery – some permanent some not. All form the exterior “skin” we inhabit. We use this enhancement as a way to camouflage ourselves from others and to make others take notice of us. One way or another we give into the allure and draw of beauty

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either by avoiding it or playing upon it; both overlooking the “inside” of the person contained therein.

Drawing on themes of ornamentation, the baroque, and gothic aesthetic, I began to decorate the tops of the umbrella with frosting and gum paste flowers, some of which were traditional English/eatable flowers and others that were poisonous. With the beauty of flowers, I was hoping to create an effect of overwhelming decadence. I was never able to reach a state of critical mass on the top side of the umbrellas. The gum paste flowers were time consuming and I found that I truly disliked making them. Regardless of that, I researched traditional cake decorating methods and learned to make gum paste flowers. Unfortunately, I made them too well. It became difficult for people to tell that the flowers I made were fashioned from sugar, a fact that made all the work I was putting in rather null and void.

I became overwhelmed with the size of the umbrellas and my inability to “finish” them to a degree where I was content. The inspiration that I had originally used to start working on them became lost in the theories of post-modern rhetoric and directions that everyone thought they should go in. The original aspects of sugar and frosting were overtaken by people’s need to understand what it was I was trying to say and my inability to convey in an exact sense the many issues I was thinking about. Furthermore, people seemed unable to recognize the tops as made with sugar and the overall lack of interest undermined my sense of purpose. I kept making changes to the umbrellas that went unperceived by people and the reworking of the same pieces...
repeatedly became stagnant. I eventually put them aside to start small studies in different materials and to determine where it was that I was trying to go with my work.

It was at this time that I found the book *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* by Geoffrey Harpham. I have to say that no single source in the last two years has helped me clarify and solidify that which I was trying to make more than this book. I began to fully realize that I was working in a tradition known as the grotesque and that all the concerns I had pertaining to my work were hallmarks of the nature of the grotesque. Harpham states that, “beneath any given blended or mixed form there might be two distinct ways of understanding the world, one in which such mergings and minglings made sense, and one in which they did not” (Harpham 2006). I realized my inability to fully articulate what I was trying to achieve was because at some point everything I had to say contradicted itself; there was always an exception to the rule. With *On the Grotesque* I was finally able to accept that ‘contradictions and indefinable nature of my work, was in fact one of its strengths. “When we use the word grotesque, we record, among other things, the sense that though our attention has been arrested, our understanding is unsatisfied” (Harpham 2006). There was not a single property that was the hallmark of my work, but rather the blending of multiple forms that denied the viewer the ability to isolate, identify, and describe without at once begging a question.

At this point, I decided to work on studies that I was able to create more quickly and that I could produce multiples of rather easily. Thus I started *Tactile Corpuscles* and looking into the nature of my inability to articulate that which I was trying to create to others. I had found a tree stump the year before and had become enamored with the fatty skin-like folds that surrounded

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6 Harpham, On the Grotesque?: Theories of Contradiction in Art and Literature. 2006
7 Ibid.
the knots on the trunk. I removed the bark, sanded it down, and then lacquered it to take away traces of the tree’s bark texture. I then made rubber molds (negatives) from which I cast thin flesh-toned knots. I embedded opal doublets within the rubber. The so-called “flesh” becomes a setting for the stone. The stone at once acts as a decorative element and some malignant sparkly cancer or mole. The forms can no longer be linked to the tree they are a direct copy of but rather recall flesh and bodily orifices. The shapes become deflated breasts, belly buttons, and despite their unsettling nature create a need to be touched, if only to see what they really are. They are at once both familiar and completely foreign.
**Thesis**

Having firmer hold in the grotesque and a new found comfort in what I was doing I started to look at ways to combine all the things that speak to me at once. Things that have always been related in my mind but that I had a difficult time explaining to others.

Broadly and basically speaking, we apprehend the grotesque in the presence of an entity— an image, object, or experience—simultaneously justifying multiple and mutually exclusive interpretations which commonly stand in a relation of high to low, human to subhuman, divine to human, normative to abnormal, with the unifying principle sensed but occluded and perfectly perceived. (Harpham 2006)\(^8\)

Delving more into the psychological nature of self and the shells we create I began to look at shells as a direct reference to the idea. In his book *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard relates the idea of shells to humans by relating the human soul as being protected by the shell of the human body. Shells protect, encapsulate, and shelter the host. Bachelard also goes on to discuss the medieval engravings of creatures emerging from coiled shells. As the mollusk does not ever entirely come out from the shell, the creature that remains inside contradicts that which does come out. (Bachelard 1994)\(^9\)

I had been collecting shapes from the wax steamer that I found to look surprisingly identical to mussel/clam shells. A shell I realized becomes the manifestation of the outer protective persona we create. As the shell of a mussel grows, it reflects the conditions of the environment around it. During times of low food supply it grows more slowly, leaving ridges.

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\(^8\) Ibid.

The shell of the mussel can become damaged and marred therefore the shell becomes the history of the life the creature has lived. Once the mollusk has died, a shell can be broken open and “read.” Despite a life rife with danger on the sea floor, still the mollusk inside keeps adding to its carrier shell. There is even a species of mollusk, Xenophoridae, which decorates its shell with bits of detritus, glass and other shells. At once both beautifying and camouflaging itself from predators. Actively selecting and choosing certain bits of shell and other items found on the sea floor to add to its “home,” the shell that it resides in. (Beechey 2007) This process is remarkably similar to the way we develop our personas.

Once again working with wax and the methods of piecing multiple forms together, this was the first time I used a form entirely created from the process of another creation. The wax mollusks formed during the steaming out of wax from other molds. I then pieced the wax mollusks together to form clusters of mollusks reminiscent of a bed of oysters. These configurations were then cast in opalescent glass to remove them visually from the direct reference of mollusk while at the same time still recalling the shell form but more subtly. I used the make-up compact as a stand in for the human identity, the mirror capturing a reflection of the viewer, hoping that the concept of humanity overlaps with that of the mollusk.

In Reflections of Self: Perceptions of Others I have combined animal, machine, human (represented by the compact) and social and psychological phenomena to represent what I see as an aspect of our human condition. This human condition as I see it is the vacillation between the desire to show and expose our true selves and the very need to cover up and keep hidden the same thing. To keep others from the very thing we so desperately want them to understand. We conceal and perfect ourselves externally, whether through appearance or the persona we create

10 Beechey, Des. Family Xeophoridae Carrier Shells. 2007
and we revel in our ability to do so. We are proud (even me) of the expert application of make-up, a flawlessly composed outfit, or the perfect presentation at an interview. All the while, we constantly question our need and desire to fit in, to conform to societal conditions, and participate in vain endeavors. It is this inability to choose between our conflicting desires, and the conflicting demonstration of our internal and external selves that is the hallmark of my thesis.

It is my intent that the mingling of human with that of animal, mechanical, and medical all in the form of some fantastical yet fictional landscape come together to create a unifying and yet visually convoluted theme. A grotesque that becomes,

    An expression in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in a bold and fearless connection, of truths which would have taken a long time to express in a verbal way. The delight of interpretation is the puzzling-out of this truth, which is implied just as strongly by what is left out as by what is included. It is the “gaps” left or overleaped by the haste of the imagination. (Harpham 2006)\textsuperscript{11}

From a distance, the piece at first glance appears to be a fantastical futuristic landscape. Architecture based forms rise to hold up cloud formations. The motion of the viewer entering activates the opening of the make-up compact. It stays open until the viewer walks out of range of the motion sensor where with the whirl of a buzzing motor the compact closes again. The entire structure sits on an organic shaped white plinth and is interconnected by a series of wires and computer boards.

The mirror contained within the compact becomes a metaphorical window into the soul, a gazing ball for revealing all our interior issues through the viewing of the exterior self.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
Humankind has had a preoccupation with mirrors for over 8,000 years. (Enoch 2006)\textsuperscript{12} It may be that without some type of reflective surface, we lack the ability to ever see ourselves in our entirety; more specifically, we are completely unable to see our own faces.

Today, in any first world home, it is hard to enter a room without catching a glimpse of oneself in a mirror. I conjecture that our captivation with “seeing” goes farther than that—we are obsessed with seeing ourselves. Yet the irony is that the reflection we see in the mirror is not really what anyone else sees. It is the reverse of how we appear to everyone else. We are also obsessed with our appearance to others. We are further preoccupied with the notion that someone is watching us. Watching our mistakes, seeing our insecurities… it is hard to know if we are watching ourselves in the mirror or watching other people watch us. We are completely engrossed with seeing ourselves and seeing what others see. It is for this reason that we spend so much time hiding ourselves, so much time recessed into the crevices of our shell, convinced that others will see only what we present and want them to see, all the while terrified that they might catch a glimpse of those parts of ourselves we would rather keep hidden.

However, as no shell is ever completely secure, often the process of covering our issues makes our issues know to all but the very unperceptive. Frequently, those things that we try to hide become glaringly apparent by the very same efforts. Given away by the cover we try so hard to develop, for no cover can be maintained at all times. We all must come out of our shell at some point.

\textsuperscript{12} Enoch, Jay. History of Mirrors Dating Back 8,000 Years. 2006
Attached to a servomotor controlled by a motion detector, the compact opens much like a mussel or clam would. Yet the mechanical sound of the motor and the wire grid that attaches all the pieces together reduces the magical and unexplainable nature of the work. There is no magic here, at least not within the mechanics of the piece, just as our inner workings are so often detectable through the shell we have created.

The compacts are altered to loosely replicate the texture of the glass pieces and visually tie the two elements together. It is the glass, rather than the compact itself that contains the luminosity, beauty, and “magic” of the piece. The opalene glass shines with its own light and counteracts the highly technical nature of the mechanics. Even in the form of gnarly mussels, glass shines and makes itself pretty.

The entire structure is held up by a base of cast aluminum highly reminiscent of gothic cathedrals and the more organic growth of stalactite and stalagmite mounts. They are meant to be a melding of organic and architectural forms and to signify the history and experiences that hold us all up and help form who we are. As an overall form the work sits on an organic shaped plinth. The plinth helps raise the work up from the floor and brings it up to a more accessible height. It further serves as a way to connect all pieces and plug them in without adding a network of cords associated to the power supply. The white color helps create visual unity between the floating mollusks, which are also white.
I had originally planned to include multiple pieces in my final thesis. During the second half of the semester, I decided I should focus my time on the single large central piece as I felt I was dealing with new elements that I was unfamiliar with, namely the electronics and large size. After I finished the install a few days early, I realized I would have enough time to finish some of the other work I had originally intended to include.

All the pieces in *Reflection of Self: Perceptions of Others* sit on a white plinth, so when I decided to include some of the other work I had been doing earlier in the semester, I chose to create shelves that also had organic shapes and were designed in a way that complemented the plinth.

The last two pieces I included in the show were entitled *Geodesique*, and meant to be a play on the form of a geode and the crystals so commonly found within. As a child, I was fascinated by the geodes my father kept as bookends in the house.

![Figure 13. Geodesique, Study 2](image)

Both gnarled and sparkly at the same time, the exterior seldom gave hint at what laid within. I hoped that the mirrors in *Reflections of Self: Perceptions of Others* would give people the entrance they needed to understand the piece was about how we see ourselves. After seeing everything set up, I realized the overall effect of the piece somewhat dwarfed the original intent. I still wanted

![Figure 14. Geodesique, Study 1](image)
the internal/external theme that was/is so important to me to be prevalent in my thesis work so I decided to finish the Geodesique pieces and include them.

I consider these first “geode” pieces to be studies. I want them to be bigger and more powerful. I want to play more upon my ideas of beauty and the exterior. This beauty is itself a contradiction to the real life appearance of a geode where the outside is the unattractive part of the form. In the first geode study, the external texture is more aquatic and the color brighter and more “glass-like” in quality. The pills are opaque and clustered in crystal-esque growths. They evidence illness and medical treatment and the truth of what lies within so many of our forms. The second geode study has a more organic and cellular external texture. The surface is more sand/stone like and the colors less vivid. The inside is full of empty pill capsules, once again arranged in crystal-like formations. From a distance, it is unclear as to what the gelatin capsules really are. Only upon closer inspection does it become evident that they are actually pills. The capsule itself begins to replicate the clear transparent nature of the glass.

It want to continue to be able to expand my language and ability to talk about my work. The themes I am interested in haven’t changed, although the way I go about expressing them has. In the end, “All interpretation disfigures the artifact by rearranging, taking elements out of their contexts and placing them in new juxtaposition to one another.” (Harpham 2006)¹³

¹³ Ibid.
Bibliography


