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Cycles of Growth and Decay, and Changing the Beautiful to the Grotesque: Installation Through the Lens of Printmaking

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*Cycles of Growth and Decay, and Changing the Beautiful to the Grotesque: Installation Through
the Lens of Printmaking*

Madeline Cochran

Honors Thesis

Prof. Elaine Rutherford

Spring 2017

*Cycles of Growth and Decay, and Changing the Beautiful to the Grotesque: Installation Through
the Lens of Printmaking*

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Thesis Summary

The intention of this project is to create an installation informed by printmaking processes and to explore the tension between what is fragile and delicate and what is decaying and visceral. Specifically, I am working with materials I find delicate and beautiful including: fine Japanese paper, lace, yarn and embroidery floss. I am coating and manipulating these materials with wax, epoxy-resin and baby oil to give the work a fleshy and unsettling feel. Through the process of working with these materials, I have created paper sculptures made from a mold cast from my own torso, miniature books made from monoprints and jars filled with lace and snippets of my own hair solidified with epoxy-resin. During my research, I have mainly drawn inspiration from Eva Hesse's hanging installations and sculpture and film director, Guillermo Del Toro who work from the beauty of the grotesque. I have also drawn inspiration from the writer, Susan Stewart who writes on the miniature and the gigantic as a metaphor for longing. Using the female form, and stereotypical feminine objects, I intend to connect with the viewer in an intimate way and express vulnerability unique to my experience as a woman.

Introduction

Before starting my thesis, I learned that lace could be printed leaving an almost perfect impression onto paper. When printed each stitch and stray thread is seen and highlighted. I became interested in the way the floral pattern and texture would unravel when I ripped and manipulated the material. Lace is also something engendered as feminine and often part of my daily experience. Lace is an intimate material used for undergarments, for clothing on special occasions or adorning a grandmother's bedside table. By ripping and cutting the lace, I intended to express a vulnerability linked to my own experience as a young woman by showing the imperfections of the material. The delicacy and organic imagery of lace, particularly when unraveled or ripped and seemingly decaying, became a reference point and metaphor for the content of my honors thesis.

My honors thesis project began by combining two mediums, printmaking and sculptural/installation work. As a result of my previous work, I wanted to incorporate intricate materials such as lace and other textures. Faced with the difficulty of creating without a fully-developed concept, I explored my work through the lens of printmaking processes and its materials. I began experimenting with paper and string in order to compare the tension between the delicate and fragile and the aged and the decaying that I had discovered from printing lace¹.

I. Fall Semester Process and Research

¹ See Image 1. Page 13

In the Fall of 2016, I began experimenting with printmaking and installation from the perspective of formalism: color, line, shape texture and visual weight. Working with these elements gave me a basic structure to frame my work. I chose the color black to eliminate color pallet complications. I used the technique of hand printing on paper from a 5 x 7 inch woodblock and printed three separate series. I printed the first series onto thirty pieces of paper from a plain woodblock. In the second series, I printed thirty prints after carving through half the woodblock. For the final series of thirty, I carved through the woodblock completely. In order to combine these prints into an installation, I used different techniques to connect the multiple prints including cutting slits into the paper. At the same time, I created collagraph plates using delicate materials including lace, string and feathers. From the collagraph prints, I cut out various organic shapes that I saw in the image using an exact-o knife.

I felt that sewing would most effectively convey my interest in intimacy and the body. The process of sewing by hand is linked to the personal and assumes the speed of the body (Stewart, 47). Baby oil was used to give the printed paper a greasy, skin-like and oily quality. I stitched using black thread to reflect the line patterns printed from the woodblock. The 5 x 7 inch prints were used to create a quilted tapestry to hang from the ceiling in the center of the FOG Gallery. By hanging the piece in the center of the gallery, the viewer could interact with the piece in the round and see the underside of the stitching. From the hanging prints, I attached long black threads that dangled to the ground with needles tied to the end of the string. The needles gave the work a more active narrative and reaches out to the viewer onto the floor.

The hanging of the installation was primarily influenced by the formalist and minimalist sculpture artist, Eva Hesse. I am inspired by Hesse's use of evocative materials to allude to the

body by allowing it to fold and bend in gravity. Sussman writes that Hesse's hanging sculpture², "encouraged empathy between the viewer and the sculpture because, like the human body which it resembles in its lumps, bumps, folds, and crevices, soft sculpture is literally subject to the force of gravity to a degree that rigid sculpture is not" (Sussman, 34). I wanted to use gravity to create a hanging sculpture and began sewing in a way that reminded me of stitching and sutures in order to convey work inspired by the body.

Another printmaker and installation artist I drew inspiration from is Kiki Smith. Smith is a printmaker and installation artist who uses folklore and animals to explore the border between innocence and adult emotion. Much of her work also deals with visually showing the vulnerability of the human body. After seeing a sculptural piece where she created a paper sculpture of the female form deteriorating, I was inspired to experiment in a similar way. After applying for and receiving a grant, my funds were used to buy 8 pounds of wax and a 10 yard role of kita-kata paper, a thin, transparent Japanese printmaking paper. I then took a cast of my own body and used the paper and wax to create a series of hollow body sculptures. I failed several times but the idea of skin and skin-like materials stayed on my mind and continued to influence my process.

Even though the body sculpture didn't work out in the way I had planned, I moved on to sculpting with beeswax. I immediately went to work with ways I could layer the paper through the wax in a sculptural form. I fell in love with wax as a material and how it can be quickly heated, melted down, reshaped and become a thin transparent layer. The fact that beeswax is a naturally occurring material with a strong smell added to the final installation's content-- something which is actively growing and decaying at the same time. I wanted the viewer to

² See Image 2, Page 13

relate to the piece more intimately through the senses. I then used molds to form the wax and collage together the black string and collagraph cut-outs. I was inspired by the work of Petah Coyne and the way she used wax to create large scale sculptures that immerse the viewer into the work. I created my own sculpture built up into a mound on the floor made from eight pounds of yellow beeswax.

From the work of Coyne and her themes of the natural world overwhelming the viewer, I was inspired to create a series of moths covering a 10 x10 foot wall. I thought of moths in relation to the printed lace in which an insect breaks down and consumes fabric. I wanted to use the insect as a symbol of the natural world that is uncontrolled, overwhelming and festering (Ritter). By printing the moths, I could replicated the image in large quantities and then cut them out from the print. I also cut out moths from the leftovers of prints and experimentations throughout the Fall semester. By using these leftovers I was reiterating the idea that the unpredictability of process and experimentation is just as important as the final product.

Upon completion of my show *String Theory*, I had three pieces installed in the FOG Gallery in the Benedict Arts Center. Both my piece *Tapestry*³ and *8 lbs. of Wax*⁴ were inspired by something actively decaying and growing in a cyclical process. The wax melts while building up into a mound and the tapestry unravels towards the ground with needles interacting with the viewer. Towards the top the yarn and prints become dense, tightening together and saturating the ceiling it hangs from. The installation of the printed moths, *166 Moths* on the wall became a reflection of the research and processes of semester.

³ See Image 3, Page 13

⁴ See Image 4, Page 13

II. Spring Semester Process and Research

At the beginning of the Spring semester I re-visited a documentary, *The Quiltmaker's of Gee's Bend*. In Gee's Bend Alabama, a group of African American women created quilts that were recognized as brilliant works of modern art. I took inspiration from their formalist approach to working with the traditional craft of quilting, and from this decided to create organically shaped quilt squares to sew together and embroider. My other goals were to make work that used a thoughtful color pallet and to use fabric that would be printed on and sewn together in a 3-D installation. I came back to a ghost-printing and stencil printing technique used in order to print anything from plants to garbage as long as the material lays flat enough to run through a press. I learned this technique Fall semester at Ladies of Letterpress, a printers conference in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. This technique allowed me to experiment printing fabric such as lace, string and yarn onto plain muslin fabric using varying shades of purple, pink, green and blue ink on the proofing press in the Welle Book Arts Studio. My printing processes and colors had become more complex from my first semester which excited me. To my frustration, I did not feel I was successfully executing the work in a way that fully expressed my vision of beauty and decay. The work was too approachable and needed to be reworked with materials that related to the body and the natural world.

I decided to return to a mold I made from Fall semester cast from my torso in order to create sculptures from paper with embroidery inclusions. The translucent paper I used then became a fiber with which I layered embroidery floss and mod-podge to hold everything together. In choosing the embroidery floss, I was inspired by the colors I used to print with at the beginning of the semester. I randomly layered the string to visually add interest to my piece and represent veins in the body.

The torsos cast from my body allowed me to satisfy a desire to convey something beautiful yet unsettling. The beauty of the female form contrasted by the color and texture of the paper created a skin-like appearance and unsettling feeling I had sought after. After feeling as though I had a successful idea to move forward from, I began preparing for installing my torsos. I wanted the torso sculptures to hang from fishing line to create a weightless suspension in mid-air. The sculptures obstruct any passerby forcing them to interact and be confronted with the multiples of my torso. I decided to name the installation *Shed*⁵, as if each hanging torso was an exoskeleton I had relieved from my figure. The torsos made from my mold reflects the process of printmaking. In both printmaking and mold-making, there is an aspect of a loss of control and increase the spontaneity with each creation of the multiple. After receiving feedback from my mentors and peers, I discovered that my bodies appeared to be “too pretty” to properly express my content. I continued to push the boundaries and intensify the skin-like or visceral qualities of the work using epoxy, wax and creating holes in the bodies.

⁵ See Image 5, Page 14

During Spring Break, I took time to visit the Minneapolis Institute of Art to see Mexican Film Director Guillermo Del Toro's *Bleak House* exhibit, and read Susan Stewart's book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, The Gigantic, The Souvenir, The Collection*. From this research, I was able to understand the choices I needed to start to make in my process. Del Toro drew lots of inspiration from the Victorian time period and their connection with science and the humanities, "Victorians embraced science, seeking to exert dominance over nature through meticulous categorization" (Ritter). The idea of the Victorian cabinet of curiosities influenced the way I began thinking about beautiful, miniature collected things in a gothic and macabre way. On display was also a Victorian era locket made with human hair, a beautiful relic made to cope with the loss of a loved one. The intricacy of the relic, as well as the use of leftover hair in the locket from the head of a human inspired me to work with hair and size. I then began to think about the miniature as a body itself and particularly the book as miniature. I began exploring the idea of the miniature using books and jars to reflect my torso sculptures. Stewart writes on the miniature that:

"In approaching the miniature, our bodies erupt into a confusion of before-unrealized surfaces. We are able to hold the miniature object within our hand, but our hand is no longer in proportion with its world; instead our hand becomes a form of undifferentiated landscape, the body a kind of background" (Stewart, 167).

The jars contained materials from my process and became an object the viewer could hold in their hand and interact with in disproportion to their own body.

I monoprinted on kita-kata paper using the familiar theme of the pastel colors and water based inks to print laces and fabric onto the paper with the same positive to negative printing technique. I then used materials such as lace, wax, snippets of hair to fill miniature jars up with and then solidify with epoxy. Again, I found the monoprints to be "too pretty." I began coating the

prints in wax and layering pieces of string and lace on top of the papers. I cut them into miniature squares and began creating tunnel books out of the prints. Like my process with collagraphs from the previous semester, I took an exact-o-knife and cut out organic shapes and holes into the paper weaving string in and out of the separate holes. I wanted the string to appear wormlike and began using hair to reference Victorian hair locket. I then used the materials from my books and jars to inform my manipulation of the body sculptures.

I coated the paper of my torsos first in baby oil, then epoxy, and finally with wax during installation. I wanted my installation, *Shed*⁶, to hang in the glass hallway in the SJU art center to highlight the beautiful and delicate qualities of the work. I built a shelf to organize the twenty-one total miniature books and jars I had made and suspended the shelf at the end of the hallway next to the window. I titled the installation of my books and jars, *Remnants and Remains*⁷. Again, I wanted to make the work as much about the leftovers of process as the final product. The jars⁸ and books⁹ became an extension of the body, a miniature self to be held. I wanted the viewer to interact with the work in an intimate way by picking up the hand-made objects as well as be forced to navigate a path through the hanging bodies.

⁶ Image 6, Page 14

⁷ Image 6, Page 14

⁸ Image 7, Page 14

⁹ Image 8, Page 14

Conclusion

By exploring materials such as lace, wax, paper, fabric, hair, and string, I was able to express the tension between what is delicate and beautiful and fleshy and decaying. The work I made throughout the 2016-2017 school year was also inspired through the physical interaction with material. When ideas seemed overabundant and overwhelming, I allowed the tactile nature of materials to lead me to the outcome of my work. I created various large-scale installation pieces that confront the viewer and respond to the weight of gravity in order to reflect a likeness of the body and its flexible nature. In my first semester, I used symbols and materials such as wax and moths to relate to the natural world and allude to the overwhelming power of organic material, both in its overgrowth and decay. In my second semester, I attempted to show a power over growth by containing my materials in jars and books on organized tiers of shelves. I showed a stronger interest in the biological during the second semester by using a cast of my own torso and covering the sculptures in visceral-like materials such as resin and wax. Overall, this project sought out to explore the idealized beauty found in the imagery of flowers, nature, curves of the female form, lace and needlework and find ways to change its beauty into the grotesque. This exploration speaks to my own experience in the world, particularly from the point of view as a young female reacting to attributes placed on women by the patriarchy.

Image 1, *Lady with Lace*



Image 2, Eva Hesse, *Seven Poles*



Image 3, *Tapestry*



Image 4, *8 lbs of Wax*



Image 5, (Process) *Shed*



Image 6, *Shed*, (Behind) *Remnants and Remains*



Image 7, (Close up of jar) *Remnants and Remains*



Image 8, (Close up of book) *Remnants and Remains*



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