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On Earth

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On Earth

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in Fiber Structure and Interlocking with Honors

May 2005

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Abstract

My thesis project is structured around a friendship that grew into an artistic collaboration. Laura Williams and myself, Kristina Foley, pulled our resources and concepts together from two seemingly disparate fields of art, Fiber Structure and Interlocking and the Media Art Program, to explore our personal identification with Feminism, magic, and the role of art in illustrating history through revealing perspectives often kept hidden. Using fibers and textile pieces we explore a women's history that has been kept private and held close to the body, while simultaneously using video and photography to re-imagine how the female is projected into the public sphere. By incorporating magic, or a visual component that encourages a sense of new possibilities, our work together is a manifestation, or culture dream, which we hope is both healing and empowering.

During the past three years we have worked together consistently using various styles of collaboration like juxtaposition, handing back and forth, and joined at the hip. Our personal experiences as female artists living and working in a patriarchal society encourage each of us to explore the roots of our individual mediums in the Feminist Movement of the 1960s. This helped lead us use collaboration as an anarchical and useful method of art making. Collaboration defies the history of the artist as individual, and primarily male, while it encourages new forms of communication and creativity. A strong collaboration takes time; the skills both parties gain are useful in both personal *neighborhoods* and professional environments. Better listening skills, trust, sensitivity, and understanding of the benefits and potential of cultural differences will develop in all collaborators.

Another advantage of collaboration is that it is great fun! The result of Laura and my friendship and artistic exploration is a show at Spark Gallery that represents a cumulative body of work we have made together. It is an environment in which the histories of our different pieces and the concepts they draw upon overlap and connect from room to room, body to body.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....I

Preface: My Thesis Project Began in a Friendship.....1 - 5

Body: As You Enter Spark Gallery..... 5 - 10

 In the First Room.....5 - 8

 In the Hallway.....8-9

 In the Second Room.....9 -10

Conclusion: Laura and I.....10 – 11

Citations.....12

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the Fifty Year Friendship Fund for their financial support which has made it possible for Laura and I to bring the scattered ideas, pieces, and limbs of our work into a full-fledged body that can engage the artistic and academic community who have long fostered and challenged our work together.

Thank You.

Also, my teachers Ann Clarke, Anne Beffel, and Joanna Spitzner whose encouragement pushed me to work in an interdisciplinary fashion, as well as in the spaces between borders. They have both given me faith in my intuition and helped me understand the artistic process as a mode of activism. *Thank You.*

Preface: My thesis project began with a friendship

Laura and I met our first week at college and quickly realized we shared a similar aesthetic, enthusiasm, and intensity in our art making. We began collaborating by doing our studio homework together and keeping a consistent conversation and critique about our individual art-making experiences flowing. Studio conversations intermingled with personal discussions and thus the root themes of our future collaborative work developed.

Our work began to define itself sophomore year when we both enrolled in a studio called “Collaborating Across Differences,” which was co-taught by two female professors from separate art disciplines. This class highlighted the importance of collaboration as a skill to improve communication, listening, brainstorming, and group projects in both professional and community environments. As Laura and I collaborated with different students and together, it quickly became apparent to me that two heads are better than one because than you not only get more heart, but four arms, four legs, and a dialogue that can strive beyond a singular imagination.

Our collaborative thesis project is a collection of works in varying media that is based on individual and shared influences, which have created a dialogue both conceptually and materially between Laura and I over the last three years. Foremost, our work is based on the strength and creativity found in our friendship: two women making art together is a political statement. It negates the historical view of artist as individual and

primarily male. Female collaboration is discouraged through the media, which ignites competition between women over our bodies, sexual partners and jobs in an attempt to maintain patriarchy. Exploring and defining feminism through art making has been prevalent to both our individual and collaborative work.

The physical products of our collaboration represent an intersection of ideas about the body, environment, and gender roles within society. Body memory, a feminist project in which women research, theorize, and create by engaging with the unspoken histories both stored by and inflicted upon the female body is a concept we try to flush out through a combination of textile and media (Haug 2). With these two mediums the female body can be explored simultaneously as personal or private and also public or accessible. Textiles, for example, lay against the skin; they both conceal and reveal the body whereas media arts project the female body into familiar public space. By collaborating with these two mediums we attempt to regain control over the gaze, and thus power, held over the female body.

Both of our separate mediums share common roots in the Feminist movements during the 1960s and 1970s. Video developed as new technology that mimicked film, but was affordable and accessible to the burgeoning middle class in America. Many feminist artists used video to

confront the cinematic history of the male gaze. Fiber Arts came into the Academy as public recognition of 'women's work' and as a powerful art form and mode of visual narration. Textile techniques continue to be adopted by a wide range of artists because of the strong symbolism they contain, but also for the subtlety abstracted, and often hidden, histories they tell.

An important influence that expanded our ideas on how women can begin to realize and explore new social roles is Magical Realism. Simply defined, "Magical Realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" (Farris 4). Both Laura and I have read many influential authors in the Magical Realist style from Latin America, Africa, and Europe. It is through reading and discussing these texts that we have been able to develop a vocabulary of our own fantastical styles and find the encouragement to explore them. The voices of Latin American women serve as an example of the importance of bringing magic, or possibility, into one's art and everyday discourse. Feminism is a discourse that is open and supportive to the integration of magical realism in its agenda because both share similar subversive and empowering practices:

"Feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history, a process that is significant not merely as corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history but

because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity” (Mohanty78).

The process of remembering is made vivid through the stylistic qualities of magical realism. For example:

“Alternate versions of officially sanctioned historical accounts are recreated so that the magical is factual and the historical impossible...the combination implies that historical events and myths are both essential aspects of our collective memory” (Faris 15,16).

Latin American women writers use magical realism to critique colonialism, weave together submerged traditions, local folk knowledge, mythology and their own regional histories to open a discourse built upon a shared reality, but open to change.

Thus, as an approach to art making, we use the influence of Magical Realism to help burst open our expectations of the mediums we use; each project takes us a step beyond how textiles and media function as modes of information in everyday society. In turn, the pieces we create using themes and components infused with ‘magic’ become personal manifestations or enactments of methods women can use to take control of their bodies, minds, and emotions. As a mode of working, Magical Realism helps us express our shared belief in life’s infinite possibility.

Our work has cumulated into a show entitled, *On Earth*. In the context of our work this phrase is intended to stimulate questions about *whose* Earth we are referencing, *whose* experiences and in what time and space...I will now invite the reader on a guided tour through *On Earth*.

As you enter Spark Gallery...

The center of the first room is filled with a pyre made from driftwood gathered by the shore of lake in Ithaca. Each piece of wood is uniquely wrapped, knotted, and bound by colorful yarn. *The Pyre* rises upwards, but it also radiates out through a circular arrangement of rose-colored stones from Lake Michigan. This work brings to the surface the history of witch burning – it does not point to a specific instance in history, but rather stands as our acknowledgement of women who have been and continue to be persecuted for their beliefs, personal power, and wisdom throughout the world. The driftwood is visibly smooth, aged, and washed by water – the element that extinguishes fire. Through wrapping, or in a sense, bandaging, the driftwood we evoke the notion of limbs set to heal and made strong by resting against one another. The bright, synthetic yarn situates the driftwood in a context of time and space; the commercially made yarn references the relationship of women to an ever-changing textile industry, which has taken a toll on us not only for labor, but also by its symbiotic relationship to narrow beauty standards.

On the wall nearest the entrance is a series of photographs taken by Laura of a performance in which I attempt to commune with a ghost of myself as a young girl. The series is named, *Tea Party with Ghosts*. The images were taken in an old graveyard from the 19th century and I wore a handmade dress that conjures girlish tea parties of days past. Through a series of gestures that revolve around a tea ceremony, I communed with my ghost self and Laura responded by framing the narrative in her camera. These images are presented in a mixture of vintage frames hung on the wall to recreate the typical display of mismatched family photographs. One of our first major collaborative works, *Tea Party with Ghosts*, creates a fantastical space where healing by engaging with a personal history can occur.

Further in the room, on the opposite wall, are two large mural prints: one is a silhouette from *Tea Party with Ghosts* in which I have climbed to the top of a tall, jagged stump that appears to be like a piece of quartz rising up from the earth, this piece is called "In Air." The other is an image of a half-submerged, petrified stump from Green Lakes, entitled "In Water." Both images are in black and white. The circular gesture of light and dark created in their placement makes the disparate images appear connected, thus linking the pyre to the graveyard performance.

Right Angles, is a video installation on the far side of the room that revolves around locating the feminine within a culture dominated by masculine production and conception. A TV monitor will be raised to eye

level, with two connected headsets for sound, restricting the viewers' movement, almost locking them to the TV. This video is a performance in which Celeste, a good friend of ours, and myself wear handmade dresses that restrict the movement of our bodies. One sleeve of each dress was sewn onto the body of the dress with a disfigured glove at the end and in the other hand each of us clutches a purse. We appear trapped in a harsh photographic lighting studio surrounded by light diffusing screens and camera equipment, which creates a landscape of rectilinear shapes. We travel through the confined space as organic beings, but are confined by our clothing, purses, and the environment until we literally intersect one another's paths and discover that our binding costumes can be broken down. The freed limbs and dresses now reveal bursts of colored fabric that was hidden beneath their bland, uniform-like exterior.

Right Angles speaks to the experience of women traveling through a male dominated space associated with the gaze, one example being the photo studio. It can serve as a fantastical metaphor for everyday maneuvering through the cultural ideas of femininity. It is not only about deconstructing the popular modes of visual representation of the female, but also about how as women we perpetuate these commonly held ideas. The two girls roam about the space completely isolated yet still hang on to learned behavior. In the end, *Right Angles* reveals how women have the power to help one another evolve past these cultural limitations by generating an increased awareness of the conditions of fellow women and

its reflection on oneself. Laura put it very well when she said, “humans maintain their own myths.” Therefore, we can also destroy them.

Nearby, is a series of fiber pieces made by knitting, fulling (felting), and dying wool so each piece resembles an animal’s pelt; this piece is named *Skins*. The pelts are stretched, nailed and suspended from the wall in the corner of the room using found rusted metal wires and hooks. Because the pelts are not dyed to perfectly match animal fur, but rather, the colors one might buy fur in a department store today, the effect is between grotesque and high fashion. For me, *Skins* raises questions about the human consumption, use, and treatment of animals and how this relates to the body. This piece is not about condemning the use of fur as right or wrong - humans have been using animal skin since the beginning of our time - rather the point is to begin to question how we can ‘read’ a changing treatment of fur in relation to our changing culture. How do we gauge what is precious or useful from an animal; how does that related to our own search for physical perfection? What is the relationship between only the choicest animal skins being used for a coat while, simultaneously, women obsess over their own skin, aging, and mortality?

In the hallway...

Hung along the wall is a series of books of poetry and drawings we have made together over the last year. This series is entitled *A Dozen* and each book (there are twelve) will be hung in an individual

pouch, dyed to resemble a splattered egg. We chose to use the theme of a dozen because of its relation to influences that affect our work: the phases of the moon, the domestication of animals for consumer culture, the number of eggs in a carton, the number of months in the Babylonian calendar...The drawings and poems are printed on semi-translucent vellum and the words and images overlap one another.

The second room...

Contains the photographs of a later performance in which I interact with a broken-down cello in a barn. The *Cello Series* deals with the tension women often feel towards their bodies as a project – a site of constant improvement - but also a life source. The shape of a cello mirrors that of the feminine form and the space of a barn refers to ideas of domesticity, breeding and captivity. This also reaches back to *Skins* in the first room. These will all be framed by handmade, felted pieces of wool and yarn that appear to look like tree bark. Geometric shapes made from colored yarns will surround each frame – these will both ‘frame’ the pieces again and physically connect them like the internal systems of a body. The frames will reference webs, the children’s game of cat’s cradle, and the geometric cellular forms that make up all life.

In the same room will hang *Shadow Cloth*, which is a black cloth stretched from the ceiling to the floor, curving in front of one corner of the room and over a doorway in the back. The cloth is twenty feet tall

and fifteen feet wide and made from black industrial felt. I have cut shapes out of it, so it moves abstractly between a forest, an aerial landscape, or a galaxy. There will be enough space to pass behind the cloth and walk among the shadows it casts on the wall from spotlights shining down from the ceiling. As the viewer steps behind the opaque cloth and shadows fall across her and the wall, we hope to raise questions of the illusion and assumption toward ones own body and environment. It should also change the viewer's mood or frame of mind; it is a transitory space before entering a second video installation, *Rabbit Roll*, in a smaller third room.

Rabbit Roll...

This video turns time and space upside-down as three characters, Laura and I included, travel from a luscious, but manicured flower garden into a shadowed Pine forest. The gestured, and responsive movements of the camera, which intersect with choreographed actions, turn this visual experience into a synthesis of body and environment: from the planned arrangement of the flower garden to the wilds of the woods.

Conclusion: Laura and I...

Laura and I have used the Thesis Project as a sounding board to experiment with a variety of collaborative working methods. During our time working together we have responded to the local

environment by gathering the materials that surround us and re-conceptualizing them through art making. We have gathered wood, rusted metal and stones from the surrounding bodies of water: a lake and the gorges in Ithaca, Lake Michigan, and Green Lakes in Syracuse. Water is a recurring theme in our work and metaphor for the feminine. Also, both of our photo series take place in different parts of the graveyard near campus and Rabbit Roll was filmed in a private garden in Cazenovia. The landscape of Syracuse and the University has offered us many resources and support; in turn we offer a translation through the form of our inspiration and gleanings.

On Earth is an environment in which the histories of our different pieces and the concepts they draw upon overlap and connect from room to room, body to body. But more than this, it is an accumulation of personal healing, activism, and manifestation. It is our visual expression of becoming women, of our friendship, and the dream we project for our community to engage within.

Citations

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Approval of Final Honors Thesis Project

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College _____ Major (**for Thesis**) _____

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Thesis title _____

Thesis Prize Category/Orientation (circle **one**):

Creative Social Sciences Humanities Natural or Applied Sciences

Thesis Advisor:

As the Thesis Advisor, I hereby certify that I have examined the final copy of this thesis, signed the title page of this thesis and approve it for submission to the Honors Program:

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Second Reader:

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