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### On Earth

Laura Mariposa Williams

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## **Working Together in Different Media**

When Junior year arrived, along with the opportunity to start a thesis project, Kristina Foley and I agreed that this was right opportunity for us to create a body of collaborative art works. From there we decided to present our final works at Spark Gallery. Our show, *On Earth*, is a collection of works in varying media. Overall, we have three videos, two narrative, photographic series, two mural photographs, a driftwood sculpture, felted pelts and photographic frames, a book of poetry and drawings held in knitted pouches, and a shadow cloth mural.

Kristina and I became close friends within the first week of school and began collaborating right away. We did it loosely at first; we would brainstorm project ideas for class, shoot photographs, and critique each other's work. Sophomore year we entered into our majors; Kristina chose Fiber Structure and Interlocking and I chose Art Video. At this point we became more focused and made our first collaborative video, *Egg*, which was surrounded by our discussions about birth control. We worked side-by-side deciding the shot compositions, and after it was complete we knew we were onto something. We continued to be deeply involved in each other's development as artists and enrolled in a studio called Collaboration Across Differences. It was there that we learned the different processes of collaboration as well as pushed ourselves to seriously work with other people; we both found collaborations to be particularly rewarding and exciting.

What does it mean to be working in such media as video, fiber, and photography? Basically, video and photography are visual media that require technological processes, which result in visual objects exploring time and narrative. Fiber art is more of a hands-on, physical process that employs the sense of touch.

Throughout our work, we found it important to combine our media as a way of inviting the audience to participate in a complete experience of the senses. Also, video and fiber have similarities in historical development.

Video art has solid roots in feminist art making especially during the 70s where works often explored the male gaze, body and beauty standards, domesticity and women's work. Video, in relation to film, functions as the more human medium because it is accessible to the consumer market. In terms of television, video is used everyday to communicate to the masses. Due to the way video looks with the usual lack of big budget, cinematic constructs, it creates an inherent sense of reality that invites the viewer into the story. I personally enjoy utilizing technological processes in order to communicate the organic elements of the environment and body as a way of fusing machines and mechanic processes with art making.

Working in fibers references an entire history of craft and the stereotypical terming of "women's work," which was also a concept explored in feminist video art. Fiber arts is associated with such projects like quilt making and weaving, which were not always recognized as art forms but rather placed under the category of "craft." With this in mind, Kristina reclaims the medium as an art form by remaking it through conceptual costume and sculpture. She also employs new processes such as dying and utilizes industrially produced wool. The fiber pieces add the tactile element to the usual "hands off art gallery" space as well as give the audience a sense of their own body through the sensation of touch. You can feel the pelts and the dresses laid out and reach into knitted pouches to pick up the book.

I approach photography in similar ways that I do with video. Each still photograph holds the weight of an action captured in time, as well as gives the visual

image the solidity of a tangible object. I see photography at its strongest when presented in a series; images can build relationships with each other and shape a larger meaning. A series allows for each photograph to move into one another and become more like a visual motion, like a video. Also, photographic narratives invite participation from the audience. As a viewer, you have to fill in the actions between scenes.

Concerning the issue of collaborative process, we worked together while conceptually developing, problem solving, and editing every project, but we usually split up the work when executing the actual pieces. Working collaboratively has allowed us to undertake larger endeavors as well as more complicated ones. Since we entered into drastically different majors, our collaboration allowed us to engage in the qualities of each other's medium. Kristina comes to the visual arts with a sculptural, tactile approach and I come to fibers with a visual, analytical approach.

We have very similar conceptual aims in our work, yet because of our vast experience in certain, specialized areas, we have very different methods of problem solving. Combining both of our sensibilities into singular works resulted with innovative solutions and a higher, creative consciousness that we could not have arrived upon by ourselves. It is for this experience that we entered into our collaboration.

### **A Preview of Themes Found in our Work**

As we created the various works for our show, we found that each project seemed to lead us into another one. As you walk through Spark Gallery, you

participate in the connections between projects that create a larger web of information. With this idea of environment in mind, we decided to install found objects that relate to the works, as well as on-site yarn designs for the walls. We truly wanted to transcend the idea of a gallery as a white box and turn it into a welcoming space rather than a mere display case.

Every work tells a story, and every story builds upon the ones around it. Our works embody many themes and most of them overlap. Some themes that we recognize in our work are magical realism, feminism, exploration of social roles, body memory, human relations to the environment, and life as a continuous cycle from an ecofeminist perspective.

While surrealism depends more on the exploration of the unconscious as formed by culture, magical realist work approaches the mundane as a scene for limitless possibility. “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). This type of free approach grants the opportunity for characters to move throughout any unique time and space, therefore manifesting a kind of mythic storyline.

Oftentimes magical realism challenges common modes of narrative and therefore confronts and alters our perception to information. Magical realist art leaves enough room for individual experience so that each viewer can travel through the workings of his/her own mind as the work unfolds. In this way magic and art work hand in hand in that they utilize inventive problem solving and analysis while giving value to the examined life.

Our work is also inherently feminist in nature. Kristina and I formed much of our friendship around discussions about being female: the challenges and assumptions

that we make about ourselves and others make about us, how to deconstruct prescribed roles, and how to find balance with our environment be it academic or the work place. We actually struggled many times to define the word feminism because it seems to have a lot of baggage; it means many different things and has many different branches such as spiritual feminism, radical feminism, etc. To me, the word feminism is a call for equality of the sexes in terms of treatment and opportunity.

I do believe that our work embodies the specific avenue of ecofeminist thought. Ecofeminism unites the destruction of the environment, the exploitation of animals, and the oppression of women as one, singular problem (Ruether 13). This type of theory asserts that a general disrespect for all forms of life manifests these imbalances.

Specific themes of social roles and body memory are also important issues in feminist thought. Social roles concern not only placement of women in culture and the history of such, but more generally, humans on this planet and our interactions with it. Body memory refers to commonly held ideas about body passed on from generations and assimilated into new standards of being.

These themes all culminate into the larger idea that life on this planet, as a whole, is an ephemeral, delicate, ever-changing cycle. The only way we can evolve as a species is to examine our history and try to move forward in progressive ways. I think part of this evolution is an embrace of our mortality, rather than a rejection or fear of it. Finding balance between nature and culture depends on empathy towards the earth as a living being. We can understand the fragility of the environment through the acceptance of our own mortality; that one day our bodies will return to the earth.

## The Art Works

In the first room of Spark there will be the video, *Right Angles*, playing on a monitor at the very back of the room. Along the right wall will be nineteen photographs of the *Tea Party With Ghosts* narrative. In the center of the room there will be the yarn-wrapped driftwood *Pyre*. Two mural photographs entitled *In Water* and *In Air* will hang on the left hand wall. Mounted throughout the room are *The Skins*, which are felted wool pieces that resemble the skins of animals.

From here I will maneuver through the show in the style of a virtual tour, share my personal readings of our work, and make connections back to our main themes. I recognize that any artwork, especially those of a more abstract nature, can evoke many different interpretations. We welcome all kinds of opinions and readings about our work, and the following description is not supposed to serve as a be-all end-all analysis of our work, but rather how I personally connect all the pieces together both conceptually and materially.

*Right Angles* is a video that presents three women maneuvering within cultural constructs of femininity. I record, as shown in the mirror reflection, as Kristina and Celeste wear handmade, tube dresses that restrict the movement of their bodies along with the challenge of walking in high heels. One sleeve of each dress is sewn onto the body of the dress, with a claw-like glove at the end, and the only free hand holds a clutch purse. These two girls are trapped in a sterile, photographic, lighting studio surrounded by man-made objects in square shapes. These devices for image composition and perfection, viewing boxes and light diffusers, stand static and ready as means to measure the worth of the bodies.

The photo studio serves as an examining room where every inch of the body is available for evaluation. The women ping-pong around the room, which creates a heightened sense of watchfulness: we watch, the camera watches, and we're reminded of the male gaze. I edited this section very heavily by using repetition and sharp cuts to further manipulate the women's movements and to participate in accordance with the rigid environment.

In the video, the women basically travel through this confined space until they finally confront each other and help one another detach the arm from the body, thus allowing them to move freely. As they begin to move, they discover bits of color, and as they tug on the corners, bursts of bright, hidden fabric spring forth. At this moment, the women deconstruct their dress like a shield guarding the standards placed on the female form and function. They confront their participation in popular ideas towards the body, so these standards no longer hold the weight as some untouchable source of restriction. It's as if they pulled the curtain to find that the Wizard of Oz was just a man with a projector, or they found that Big Brother was just a poster on the wall. They recognize their own perpetuation of bodily ideals along with the ability to reject them.

During their breakout, I step out from behind the camera and thus break my passive participation in this environment. As they pull out the colored fabric, I deconstruct the set around them: remove the viewing machines, take away the light diffusers, and reveal the light sources behind them. These actions free up the room for more fluid movements. My editing of this event relied on inter-cutting images of the women breaking free and me breaking down the set to show how one event lead to the manifestation of the other, raising the question of who made the first move, who has the



power to change, and to reveal myself as the image-maker. I also let shots run longer and added dissolves for smoother transitions. In this way I followed the organic transformation of the performance as the women reclaimed their bodies as such. The TV monitor playing *Right Angles* is flanked by two chairs that display the empty dresses like a shed skin that indicates the presence, absence and transformation of these women.

Mounted throughout the same room is a series of felted wool pieces made to look like the pelts of animals. The pelts are stretched and mounted with rusted, twisted, wires. Some of the skins resemble snakes, cats, rabbits, and even a frog. They read like road kill animals as well as taxidermy specimens still holding onto the shape of the original body.

The pelts embody ecofeminist thought as they relate to the empty dresses from *Right Angles*. The dresses serve as a type of conformist skin that the women wear while the pelts remind us of the fascination with surface appearance and the effort to preserve it. This juxtaposition of the work creates a connection between the domestication of animals as well as women in terms of form and façade. The implied preservation of these skins can also relate to the hyper-awareness of the female form as it ages. Processes like face-lifts, tummy tucks, and botox injections are commonplace among women these days. Not only is it an action against the surface signs of aging, but it is also a disrespect towards the idea that aging is to be avoided; that you lose your sexual appeal as an older woman. The consumer market focuses on women's appearance; your body becomes public property, a prize, and something totally detached from who you really are. *The Skins* present the exterior of a body as a trophy of conquest since pelts can only be acquired from dead animals.

Along the right hand wall is our first photographic narrative, *Tea Party With Ghosts*. Kristina made a girlish, layered dress that evoked memories of childhood and then re-created a tea party adventure with the ghosts of her youth. The photographs are mounted in a cluster, which is reminiscent of a mismatched collection of family portraits found on a living room wall. The presentation of both whole and cropped photographs allows for the viewer to participate in the construction of the narrative.

The repeated actions in the photographs and changing scenery along with non-linear way in which they are mounted, generate a general suspension of normal, time progression. The photographs portray relatively similar actions but appear both in color and black and white. This stark contrast in imagery establishes that both the present and the past can happen simultaneously, which references the idea of ghosts and the possibility of multiple realities.

In the center of the room is the *Pyre*, which is driftwood wrapped in different colors of yarn. The pyre, in context of locating the feminine, along with the idea of ghosts, references the major witch burnings such as the ones that took place in Salem. The witch burnings were a radical persecution of females who exhibited “abnormal” lifestyles contrary to ones approved of by society and the church. Mostly women were practicing homeopathic methods or earth magic, but in a time of increasing patriarchy, this was seen as a threat to the system (Eller 172). In turn, the pyre relates to the video, “Right Angles,” where the entrapment of a photographic studio takes the modern form of persecution of the natural feminine.

The logs of the pyre are driftwood and therefore imply the wear of water, which is the equalizer of fire. The wrapped logs are bandaged in yarn, which evokes the notion of healing while at the same time relating to the knitted dresses that have come

apart in “Right Angles.” Since most of our work is imbued with feminist themes along with a magical twist, I see the pyre as an acknowledgement to the collective memory of these women who practiced the same arts we do but were punished for it.

Kristina and I always wrapped the logs in front of a fire. The driftwood sculpture was the one project we worked on entirely together due to the scale and the importance of ritual in process. Because we acknowledged it as a piece about dialogue between women about women’s history, it made sense to execute the piece together in order to embody our sense of remembrance.

Along the opposite wall of *Tea Party With Ghosts* are two black and white, mural photographs 30 x 40 inches. *In Water* is a close up image of a log underwater. The log’s time spent submerged is revealed through its soft, algae covered texture. The water was murky, so the tones of the photograph read as a muted, ash gray. *In Air* depicts a silhouetted Kristina sitting atop a dead, splintered tree that resembles a pyre. These two photographs not only share similar composition and framing, but also reiterate the *Pyre* narrative about extinguishing the fires of feminine persecution.

Located in one of the window seats near the entry of the room is the video, *Egg*. This is a short, two and a half minute, rather abstract video of a girl who contemplates her own fertility and deals with ideas of birth control. The way shots are composed, repeated and sometimes discontinuous, implies that there are multiple realities of the same girl existing at one time. This is meant to show how this girl is not only pulled in different directions, but also how many girls everywhere deal with the very same issues.

In the beginning she stands at the window holding an egg. She looks up and sees herself on the street. Then she appears at the refrigerator and opens it. It is empty.

She stares for a bit then enters into a vision of a pink rose in a flower garden. She returns out of her vision and finds eggs in the fridge as if she manifested her fertility. She picks one up and examines it, and then the girl at the window turns and examines her egg as well. She goes back into the same vision and this time gets to the top of rose where she finds an egg nestled into the pink petals. The vision ends with her looking out the window where she sees herself in the road again. This time we enter the space of the road where she kneels down and releases a number of eggs that roll downhill. The eggs, like her body, are released into a public space and as her fertility becomes her responsibility; one that is both empowering and daunting.

Just outside the first room is a narrow hallway where twelve copies of our book hang, each in their own yolk colored, hand knitted pouches that are attached to rusted door hinges. The book, A Dozen, contains six of my poems along with six of Kristina's drawings. The number originates from the numbers of months in a year, the cycles of the moon, and quite simply, an egg carton containing a dozen, little embryos of unformed life.

The book is printed on translucent vellum, which reads as a type of skin because of the visual fragility of the pages. You can also see your fingertips behind the pages as you flip through. We paid particular attention to the interaction of the text laid over the image, so that even the text can be seen as a mere shape. The words almost dissolve into the drawings, and are only revealed when pulled away from the rest of the pages. The book's small size, 5.5 x 8 inches, creates a sense of intimacy and revelation of personal history.

The second room just around from the hallway holds our second photographic narrative, *Cello*, displayed in felted frames. At the end of the room hangs the *Shadow Cloth*. In the last, small, adjoining room is a projection of our third video, *Rabbit Roll*.

The *Cello* series deals with the push and pull women often feel towards their own bodies both as cultural constructs and spiritual vessels. Consumer culture tells women their bodies should be sites of constant improvement, yet women also remain aware of their power to give life and the cycling of their body as an organic system.

Basically, the narrative is the journey of a girl through emotional and physical issues surrounding the female form. The female form is represented by a broken-down cello that she carries around. The instrument quite literally mirrors the hourglass shape of the female form. *Cello* opens with Kristina holding her arms in the air with a broken-down cello propped in a tree behind her. It is as if she conjures the cello, the representation of her own feminine form, as something separate; as a form she must reckon with. She then travels into a barn. The space of a barn refers to back to *The Skins* and *Egg* with ideas about domesticity, breeding and captivity. The series ends with Kristina assimilating the position of being knighted. She kneels on one knee, face tilted upward, and her eyes are literally erased from the photograph as her face is immersed in bright sunlight. The cello rests at her side, no longer carried from place to place. This is the moment of spiritual transcendence from her form, as shown by the blinding of the eyes from the bright light as a symbol of enlightenment.

These are all framed in felted pieces of wool that resemble wood. The frames, being of a tactile nature, invite closer inspection and become objects themselves rather than being an invisible, presentation mode. Just like the wooden cello represents the

body, the fuzzy, ligament-shaped frames mimic the appearance of wood, which creates further dialogue about representational form.

At the back of the room, the *Shadow Cloth* hangs. It is impressive in scale; it stretches from the ceiling to the floor and measures fifteen feet in width. The piece consists of three, sewn panels of black wool that curve in front of one corner of the room. Each panel is an abstract scene of creation, evolution, and absorption of form into the environment. This piece, like the cello photographs, also deals with illusion and assumptions toward one's own body and the separation from the environment that humans so often manifest. There is enough space to actually pass behind the cloth and walk among the shadows it casts on the wall. You become immersed in this tall, black mural that stretches high above your head that gives you a sense of your small, earthly stature.

In a small, connecting room just behind the *Shadow Cloth* is a projection of our last video, *Rabbit Roll*. Since you must walk behind the shadow cloth before you enter the room, we hoped that it would feel like a portal entrance into an alternate reality. Also, the cloth's relationship to the video mirrors that of the cello with the frames. The tactile and visual are physically combined in one space, so that you must confront both at the same time. These combinations of media create a full body art experience that draws the audience even closer to the work.

*Rabbit Roll* turns space upside-down as three characters, Kristina and I included, travel from an abundant flower garden into a shaded, woody enclave. This work deals directly with the ethereality of human form and the eventual absorption into the environment. Drifting movements of the camera along with choreographed actions

turn this visual experience into a melting of body and environment: from the planned organization of the flower garden to the untamed woods.

### **Conclusion**

I think that the element of magic is inherent to our art because it declares a certain amount of optimism and control over our lives. I see life as one, long journey that you can shape with your actions and those you inspire. Magic also asserts that there is a spiritual undertow in that life is full of endless possibility. It is easy to forget this, especially when you are surrounded by a culture that functions through money and material goods. In this way I consider myself a protestor. I reclaim my time in creative, engaging ways that speak to people about social issues. I reject the role of a cog.

For me, taking on the role of an artist is both a personal and political action. I am interested in providing people with alternate information delivered through creative forms. I find life endlessly fascinating in that everything is interconnected. As an artist, I try to make sense of these connections as a way of placing myself in the world and as a way of communicating with others. Hopefully, the result will be some kind of evolution of thought and action or at least provoke new approaches to already established issues.

**Citations**

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