ARCHITECTONIC GESTURES: SHADOW STRUCTURES

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the Requirements of the degree of Master of Fine Arts

by

Jennifer C. Collier

December, 2009
Thesis Written by

Jenniffer C. Collier

B.F.A., Cleveland Institute of Art, 2002

M.F.A, Kent State University, 2009

Approved by

________________________, Advisor

Martin Ball

________________________, Director, School of Art

Christine Havice

________________________, Interim Dean, College of the Arts

John Crawford
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. INFLUENCES</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM AND WORKING METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. SOULOUTIONS AND OUTCOMES</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURES</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figures</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 <em>Installation Number One</em>, mixed media, dimensions vary from 120” x 96” x 24,” 2009</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 <em>Aftermath: Hurricane Roger</em>, mixed media, 108” x 308” x 41,” 2009</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 <em>Aftermath: Hurricane Roger</em>, (detail 1)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 <em>Aftermath: Hurricane Roger</em>, (detail 2)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 <em>Aftermath: Hurricane Roger</em>, (detail 3)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 <em>Exit Utopia</em>, charcoal, found objects, glass, hot glue, paper, plastic, spray paint, string, and wood, 176” x 92” x 27,” 2009</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 <em>Exit Utopia</em>, (detail 1)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 <em>Exit Utopia</em>, (detail 2)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 <em>Inner-city</em>, charcoal, hot glue, paper, plastic, spray paint, and wood, 26” x 28” x 12”, 2009</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 <em>Inner-city</em>, (detail 1)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 <em>Stereoscopic, a.k.a. Remembering 5687</em>, bamboo, found material, grass, nylon fiber, paper, plastic, plastic film, and roscoe stage gels, 26” x 18” x 12,” 2009</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 <em>Stereoscopic, a.k.a. Remembering 5687</em>, (detail 1)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family, friends and professors for their continued support and encouragement throughout the duration of my thesis. I would also like to take a moment and remember the life and legacy of my mother, Ginnette Rene Omaits, 1947-2006, and my father Roger John Omaits, 1947-2008. Their love and guidance gave me the strength to follow my dream of pursuing my education and career in the arts.
I. Introduction

My current work unifies an ongoing fascination with the history of painting, architecture and photographic applications. For me, art is a spectacle, an assemblage, a gesture of simulated repetitions: arranged, projected and reconfigured for the viewer. My thesis exhibition entitled, *Architectonic Gestures*, consists of interlinking assembled structures that explore the relationship between wall, ceiling and floor. This series of work creates three-dimensional landscapes that appear frozen in the midst of a chaotic event. I incorporate drawing and painting with various objects, igniting play between the structure of the gallery and the theatrics of a gestural mark. This sense of theatre is a formal extension of the shadows cast by the gallery lights, the structural build of the wall, ceiling, and any significant features that appear in the space. My work juxtaposes found objects, home building materials, architectural models and abstract painterly approaches to signify [imply] a shift between topography, natural disasters, and tension between physical landscape and landscape of the psyche.

While the work negotiates the construction and destruction of invented space, it does so through the use of four key elements: lighting, found object, color, and placement. Lighting in and on the work is a crucial aspect of its presentation. By using specific lighting for the work, I reveal certain characteristics about its creation and interpretation. The found object is significant in that it is from leftover home construction materials and models of architectural buildings. Color has been incorporated as an extension of gestural mark, and as an aid to direct, repeat, and create a sense of illusion. Often I will use the shadows cast by various light sources as part of the drawing or cue
for painting shapes on the wall; this play with the constructed object contributes to a sense of theatre. In the placement of all these elements, I triangulate a whirling sense of gesture reminiscent of an action, event, or aftermath in an effort to recreate the residue of this experience in specific installations. The activation of space is becoming the subject in the work. The work mimics events featured in newspapers and media, but is harnessed by a careful sense of play, illumination and containment. These pieces, mostly constructed on site in the gallery respond to the parameters of the space.

Because of the temporary nature of the world in which we live, the work embodies a temporary existence. It is held together with nails, hot glue, tape, tension, balance, and paint. These temporary adhesion methods allow me to work quickly, intuitively, and compulsively while providing a metaphor for how the construction of urban sprawl has shaped our fragile landscape. Scale becomes significant in the work as a formal element within the limitations of the gallery space. The scale shift through clustering models of modern homes allows me to engage in a sense of formal play and metaphor. The intent is to suggest a loose representation of topographical building plan; city plans, natural disasters, and simulated structures that appear frozen as if photographed. The structure employs the use of architectural models, which creates a model for the setting of the viewer. Through the use of gallery lighting, theatrical lighting and hidden lights I play with concealing and revealing a secret space. Much like an architect who organizes space for specific purposes in the environment, my work functions to organize a contemplative space for the viewer. Overall, my graduate work represents an extension and experimentation with many ideas about painting and reflects
my ongoing interest in light, shadow, space, and time in architecture, shadow, within the context of painting.

II. Statement of Problem and Working Methodology

My graduate work has changed significantly from my undergraduate and post undergraduate studies. However, the core running through my explorations is an attraction to photographic devices as a creative aid in constructing a painterly object. My previous work, abstract in nature, explored the similarities and differences between painting and photography through a photorealist approach. They began with photographs as a starting point for exploring composition and color. The photographs chosen, time lapsed, blurred, cropped, and manipulated by the camera so the identity of the landscape or subject was obscured. I used various types of single lens reflex cameras, which had slightly altered optical components, and through simple shaking, tilting, swinging, maneuvering the camera-in a gestural way, I would manipulate how the film captured the late night landscape. This allowed for a direct transcription of photographic light, which would then be the inspiration for the paint on canvas. In this manner, I could emulate the medium of photographic papers, generating a painted surface that looked almost photorealistic. With these explorations it was important that the surface retained a tension between glossy and matte and suggested an illusion to special depth.

In my first two semesters at Kent State University, I had two parallel but different bodies of work: one that continued to explore this relationship between painting and photography and another that was starting to explore non-oil based paint media and drawing. I began to experiment with various wet media; employing gouaches, coffee, tea,
watercolors, various acrylic and water based mediums. Instead of relying on the photography to act as a source, I used my imagination. This was a daunting transition because the photograph was a safety net, almost a readymade, and a place to start a creative reaction. In my current work the found object is the safety net, but only until it is collaged with other disparate elements and becomes something else. I started researching, reading, making copious amounts of drawings, and collecting fabric, magazine print material, and found objects. My intention was to arouse a response by bombarding my senses and intellect with information.

The drawings in my first semester combined aspects of neo-abstract expressionist techniques and drawing using various colored pencils, ink and graphite. These early drawings hinted at a quick gestural play with color and application of paint followed by graphite line drawings of small residential homes. A plan of a city or a cityscape drawn with very light line was combined with wet media, evolving into larger drawings that would collage abstract mark making with taped sections acting as a relief. It was also during this time that I began to collect images of natural disaster news photos and future architecture on my computer; I felt these sources articulated the gestural marks reoccurring in my early drawings.

III. INFLUENCES

Part of my research while at KSU, inspired me to explore the work of artists such as Julie Mehretu, Kurt Schwitters and Sarah Sze. Each artist creates a different captivation; most create a pictorial or physical sense of space and structure in their work. My interest with Mehretu peaks in her application and implementation with source and
subject matter. My fascination with Schwitters came with researching his *Merz* philosophy, more so his *Merzbau* structures. And Sarah Sze seems to pull in some of Schwitters *Merz* aesthetic in her inventive collage of readymade objects while exploring a room sized assemblage. Although their environment is imaginary, their sources are based on real or altered tactile objects. In my previous pursuits as a painter, this physical rendition of invented landscape was a goal that I sought.

I see a connection between this goal, and the work of Julie Mehretu. Mehretu, for example, makes large-scale paintings that often depict a cataclysmic event. This is done by collaging various appropriated sources, projecting, then tracing these sources directly onto the canvas. Her paintings are densely layered like blue prints on an architect’s desk with an occasional hint of sign or directional signifier. The sense of physicality in her work comes from the sheer size of the paintings; they are grandiose history sized paintings with cryptic layering of information. Mehretu’s work is significant in that it allowed me to see the connection between the source, application, and implementation of subject matter. Her direct use of appropriated images creates a thick painted surface, often looking like a map, or abstract expressionist drawing. I use this in my work by drawing and painting certain parts of shadows cast by assembled model fragments on the wall. However, Mehretu’s work is much more complex, it is a collapsed layering of images, information, and actions which support it’s strength- this is a goal in the work.

There is something jarring, upsetting, and uplifting about images of disaster and it’s aftermath. Presented is a simultaneous conflict between the emotional reality and the objective stance of the experience of a disaster. With the aid of computers and other mapping devices, these documentations become a source of geographic history. While
collecting images from various news sources, I began to read the stories of recovery and reconstruction of disaster. Also the subjects of economy, urban blight and shrinking cities surrounding the Midwest have had personal and financial significance to me.

Inspired by my research on Julie Mehretu, I began drawing from projections of small constructed pieces of wood, popsicle sticks, foam core, balsawood, string and sturdy paper supplies, which were all mostly found objects. My constructions would mimic the basic gesture or attitude of a digital Computer Assisted Drawing (CAD) rendered model. I became interested in the awkward shapes in the pieces of material I collaged; there was a direct relationship between the shape and their resemblance to computer generated plans for contemporary architecture. After experimenting with projecting models onto the wall, I began to ask myself how to make a model that responded to the light as much as it responded to the demands of gravity, balance and weight. Could there be a link between the projected object and its recorded source, a mirror, images or invented scape? This was the beginning in a new direction for the work.

Although the early constructions were rudimentary, hot glued, wedged together with various art supplies existing in my studio, this method allowed me to work quickly and construct a dimensional object. My working process was ad hoc in the sense that I projected a hot-glued version of a model on the wall, then illuminated and made charcoal drawings of the shadows. The drawings were sketched directly onto paper, as a photographic record. These drawings were then rotated, allowing for an abstraction of the shapes by further working with the charcoal. This led to the realization that projection was a form of photography, much like a camera obscura and early magic lanterns shows.
While the camera obscura had a strong link to the history of painting according to David Hockney as implied in his book *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of Old Masters*, magic lantern shows were the equivalent of cinema before moving film. By projecting the shadow of a partial model, I could create a common signifier; this could be used as a direct transcription of the model or an invented landscape contradicting the objects original purpose. This process was exciting and conducive to my partiality for working at night. It was also a way for me to bring my love for photography back into my studio practice.

IV. SOULOUTIONS AND OUTCOMES

One of my pending questions at this point was how to merge new experiments together with drawing, painting, small construction and admiration for architecture; my solution was to first build constructions on a very small scale, tectonic movements with a jarring abstract shape in the small models would resemble constructivist architecture. I would then project these small structures, from various angles, onto a single piece of paper and trace their shadows in line. These drawings would lead to more questions about space and the possibility for construction and deconstruction.

I was fascinated with my new collection of line drawings but felt they lacked physicality. I did not have the competency in model making to build something more complicated so I collected several large garbage bins full of left over models from the architecture department. From this detritus I would reconstruct, alter, suspend, hot glue and cover an entire studio wall with these architectural models. Some models were appropriated whole from the detritus others were invented, reconfigured,
decontextualized into a wall-sized sculpture. This was a giant break through. I made an
installation titled, *Installation Number One*, 2008 (Figure 1.1) that slightly resembled a
topography of an imaginary city struck by a man made force. This particular installation
was site specific and grew outside of the boundaries of my studio. I learned from that
experience that one of the answers to my experimentation with architecture was not in the
application of paint, but the reconstruction of material object.

As I built this particular installation, *Installation Number One*, 2008, I
documented it in stop animation format. This would allow me to reference my moves,
frame by frame, to learn from this new event. For this large wall construction I
documented each new edition of cardboard, nail, balsawood, model, paper and any
material I would incorporate. By documenting the evolution of the work I could critically
evaluate the construction’s progress. This is significant because it allowed for a bridge
between my previous painting work and current work. Through the use of photographs as
documentation I could see subtle shifts in the source and outcome. Instead of
documenting and manipulating the surrounding landscape in paint, as I had with my
previous work, with my graduate explorations I am creating sculptural landscapes with
detritus from the real world.

My hunger and aptitude for critical thinking in the working process has pushed
my questions and pursuits to new heights. As I began to analyze the strengths and
weaknesses of each new project I realized that there was a lack of exploration with color,
refining scale, and attention to material. In my thesis show titled *Architectonic Gestures*,
one of the assembled installations, which confronts these formal issues, is the work titled
*Aftermath: Hurricane Roger*, 2009 (Figure 2.2).
Hurricane Roger is an invented name in terms of national geological weather storms, however this title has personal significance. The personal aside, the work deals with a direct translation of several simultaneous forces; the pattern of weather forming in a geological view (a.k.a. Doppler), the material of possible destruction by a hurricane (as assembled in the work), and my interpretative rendering with objects and mark making. In Aftermath: Hurricane Roger I use the wall as surrogate for a canvas or paper and attach architecture models, Styrofoam packing material, home construction material, as well as drawing and painting directly on the wall. This creates a re-assembled view of a real, yet, imaginary force. I incorporate color as a repetitive cue. The color choices are indicative of the materials that are found or specifically chosen. In this installation I wanted to incorporate brighter more hyped colors like those in summer road construction and remodeling to indicate a contemporary palette.

There is a very strong diagonal force in the design of Aftermath: Hurricane Roger, which relates to the work of the Italian Futurists and the contemporary installation artist Sarah Sze. I have seen two installations first hand by Sze, Seamless, 1999 and Lower Treasury, 2000. Her work is inventive, expansive and engages the alternative uses of materials and gallery space. In Aftermath: Hurricane Roger I also try to confront the boundaries of the gallery space by touching the floor, using the wall as prop, using the gallery lights as drawing material, and forcing the movement in the sculpture towards the ceiling. In Sze’s work Seamless, she also uses verticality to create a rhythmic, almost musical, shift between object and subject. Also in Seamless, Sze punctures the gallery wall by sawing multiple sized rectangles, these read as a frame, window, and passage from one room to the next. In these formal and playful transitions between material,
subject matter, and gallery space Sze generates a sense of humor in the work. This is something I strive for in my work.

V. CONCLUSION

After the construction of the work for my thesis show I am left with even more questions about material, lighting, installation, intention, context and observation. It is with these questions my pursuit of professional practice and explorations will begin. It is obvious I have traded my formative painterly skills for those of a sculptor or modern architect, I still have a drive and curiosity about the traditions in painting, painterly, and applicable art endeavors.
Figure 1.1 *Installation Number One*, mixed media, dimensions from 120” x 96” x 24,” 2009.
Figure 2.1 Aftermath: Hurricane Roger, mixed media, 108” x 308” x 41,” 2009.

Figure 2.2 Aftermath: Hurricane Roger (detail 1)
Figure 2.3 Aftermath: Hurricane Roger (detail 2)
Figure 2.3 Aftermath: Hurricane Roger (detail 3)
Figure 3.1 *Exit Utopia*, charcoal, found objects, glass, hot glue, paper, plastic, spray paint, string, and wood, 176” x 92” x 27,” 2009.

Figure 3.2 *Exit Utopia* (detail 1)
Figure 3.3 Exit Utopia (detail 2)
Figure 4.1 *Inner-city*, charcoal, hot glue, paper, plastic, spray paint, and wood, 26” x 28” x 12”, 2009.

Figure 4.2 *Inner-city* (detail 1)
**Figure 5.1** Stereoscopic, a.k.a. Remembering 5687, bamboo, found material, grass, nylon fiber, paper, plastic, plastic film, and roscoe stage gels 2009.

**Figure 5.2** Stereoscopic, a.k.a. Remembering 5687 (detail 1)