AN OVERSIMPLIFIED CONSTRUCTION OF A COMPLEX UNCERTAINTY

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

by

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November 2011
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all my family and friends for both your support and input throughout my academic career. Above all, I would like to thank my husband, Jim for supporting me throughout all the challenging times.

I would like to thank Isabel Farnsworth, my advisor, for her honesty, understanding, and commitment to helping me. Thank you to my committee members, Carey McDougall, Janice Lessman-Moss, and Paul O’Keeffe for all of their help. In addition, thank you to all of the other professors and individuals who gave of their time.

You have all been an important part of my life.
INTRODUCTION

My art grows out of insight and knowledge about materials and processes. As I learn and understand different processes, I incorporate them into my work; one step leads to the next. Some processes proceed as expected. Others result in surprises. My method involves learning to accept and work with change. Decisions are made to repair, aggravate, camouflage, destroy the result, or continue with the idea. As Phillips, referencing Von Rydingsvard’s work explains,

“Assertion without dominance, and conviction within uncertainty, do not happen through chance or good fortune. They develop and form in the multiple (seemingly infinite) small and large decisions an artist makes each moment a work is being made.”

Likewise, the numerous decisions one makes in life can lead to changes that influence the development of the individual and society.

Everything is impermanent. Change can be a slow process. My work visualizes a system of change. The destruction of old suggested by Silence coexists with the creation of a new system, Speciation. I intend to explore the idea that our pillars, our sources of strength, at some point shatter and fall. The inevitable change can result in a negative or positive outcome; either result alters the topography of life. With abstract images, my work applies the concept of impermanence to societal and personal change.

During a recent conversation, I was reminded about the ‘good old days’, days, which no longer exist, and the accompanying inference that we, society and its members, are now in a period of decline. Are we really in a downward spiral or is this just change? My work poses this question to my audience. ‘An Oversimplified

1 Phillips 101
Construction of a Complex Uncertainty’ consists of two sculptures. *Silence* can be associated with dilapidated architectural structures, a crumbling community. Conversely, *Speciation* dances with multiple layers of growth and expansion. Together, the pieces document changes that occur within society or an individual life.

Personal evolution is a lifelong process. Many ideas influence how we evolve. We may passively encounter events that quietly have an impact and alter our self. We also may encounter events that change us significantly. These experiences shape who we are and whom we develop into. Throughout life, we are continually shedding one skin as we grow into another, transformed and transforming. Just as life involves transformations, the material I use goes through transformations. I generally use familiar raw materials and transform them into a less recognizable material, familiar yet unfamiliar. I use fiber and textiles as we are accustomed to the drape of material on our bodies; clothing, bed linen, blankets all come in physical contact with us.

Neither personal nor cultural changes occur in isolation. Intricately joined, personal and cultural transformations result in new landscapes, constructing a new environment. Past events, reconsidered, give way to different interpretations; which in turn gives rise to new compositions. The bone-like objects that make up *Speciation* are suggestive of our foundation where metamorphosis begins. Sometimes during the process of construction, reconstruction and mending, bracing is required. A brace, defined as a device that holds two or more parts together, adds support. The braces in *Speciation* made from an inorganic material, emphasize the
deliberate application of support. The braces lengths are about that of a forearm. The length was chosen for technical stability, and to provide an association between physical and personal support.

"An Oversimplified Construction of a Complex Uncertainty" considers how self and society evolve. Evolution is an ongoing process that involves decisions and transformations. Personal and cultural changes coexist and inform one another. Transformations develop and form from the numerous choices one makes.

**EARLY WORKS AND INFLUENCES**

Much like the work of a great number of artists, for example Louise Bourgeois and Ursula Von Rydingsvard, my personal memories serve as a source of insight. Bourgeois was contemporaneous of the Abstract Expressionists, who found inspiration in the unconscious mind as a compilation of feelings, thoughts, and memories. Bourgeois went beyond the surrealist aspect of Abstract Expressionism and created symbolic objects that expressed themes of trauma, alienation, and vulnerability. Her inspirations were extremely personal as she attempted to understand the body from within. Von Rydingsvard, also influenced by Abstract Expressionism, draws upon her memories to create introspective work.

Initially my work with fragments of clothing that possessed memories focused on the creation of personal narratives. Through learning additional fiber arts techniques, I expanded my media and processes. For example, I incorporated weaving techniques that added further tactile qualities to the work and the concept of time to
the meaning of the work. With interwoven threads representing the epidermis, the weavings became a metaphor for a skin.

Wanting my work to reference the body more, I began to incorporate additional organic material such as gut, latex, wood, and natural rope to create organic systems. These partially enclosed organic systems are lightweight and suspended. Similar to Lee Bontecou’s works as described by author, Orenstein there is “a prevailing central-cavity or inner-space imagery.”\(^2\), they are reminiscent of a natural hollow within the body.[see Fig.1]

THESIS WORK
Description, Materials, Process

I have never believed in the romanticism of ‘truth to materials’, the only thing that counts is whether the result has plastic validity.\(^3\)

Louise Bourgeois

The two pieces in my thesis exhibit are displayed so that they balance and contrast each other. *Silence* is dark, dense, and unfriendly, occupying the far corner of the gallery. *Speciation* sprawls into the gallery space, light, and fluid in its movement.

The two pieces in opposition to each other are of equal visual weight.

Scorched and worn out, *Silence* is redolent of collapsed architectural elements. The work consists of several thin 2” x ¾” wooden slats. Each slat is upholstered with a heavy industrial cloth. Several slats are knotted together with wire to form a cylindrical shape. The eighteen separate cylinders range in height from 6” to 18”. Each cylinder is approximately 12” in diameter; some form closed units, others remain open. Some cylinders are stacked to a maximum height of four feet, a

\(^2\) Orenstein

\(^3\) Bourgeois 39
functional limitation. The knotted wire holds the form together, although in some places the wire erratically protrudes, lacking functional purpose. The forms range in states of deterioration. A thick gray coating suggestive of old crumbling concrete covers the entire form.

If Silence suggests deterioration and collapse, Speciation entails growth and expansion. Speciation is an organic, skeletal, and visceral sculpture. It is composed of thirty modular familial units. Each unit is made from bending very thin pieces of wood, approximately 1/8" x 1" x 6', into a more organic shape. Several pieces of the bent wood were joined together to form three dimensional roller-coaster-like shapes. Covered with fleece and silicone, the forms have a visceral appearance. Each piece of wood underwent its own personal transformation. The assemblage of the sculpture took place as each component was completed and affixed to another with a clamp or metal brace. As Bourgeois stated, “Assemblage...is a coming to terms with things.” It is a union of detached components into a unified body.4

Chosen materials and processes illustrate the progression of transformation. Through various processes, materials lose their familiar association and develop into novel forms. The original context of the material is unimportant. The strength lies in the result of the transformed material.

Societal Narrative

Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.5

4 Bourgeois.20  
5 Lorde
Each architectural component that comprises *Silence* is suggestive of a former time. Some units are still intact, while others show signs of weakening with splayed open ends. Some components no longer have any structure and all that remains is the wire skeleton. They are reminiscent of dilapidated buildings that have experienced much turmoil before surrendering to their fate, and collapsing in on one another.

As one type of structure fails, inevitably another fills the void. The new formation might be structurally different, a new species. Speciation, “the process by which new genetic systems of cohesion mechanisms evolve within a population”\(^6\) does not occur concurrently nor are the new systems equal. Some systems flourish, others idle, while some decline and collapse. *Speciation* consists of wooden pieces suggestive of bones. Architecturally they are the underlying structure we build upon. Skins form on the bony surfaces resulting in numerous variations. Some surfaces reveal a strong intense coloration, others a soft sensual texture. Some ‘bones’ have soft and inviting skins while other skins are thick and impassive. Mended, tied, and sewn surfaces portray a successful repair. *Speciation* expresses the many forms of growth seen during the process of evolution.

Formation of a new way of life results in a transformation in the individual entities and an alteration in the bonds that they share with each other. Each entity displays distinctive characteristics, and the relationships that exist between them are of similar uniqueness. The interlaced units are suggestive of intimacy. Some units sprawl out from the core and remain on the outskirts indicative of isolation. Others suggest a co-dependency, physically reliant on each other for support. Additional

\(^6\) Ereshefsky 179
units are broken and in the process of their own decline, suggestive of a failed relationship. In some relationships within Speciation metal bracing provides extra support. The metal structure is a support mechanism suggestive of a formal intervention. Speciation is suggestive of a diverse system that consists of complex relationships and a societal system where change is inevitable. Each unit, viewed separately suggests characteristics of an individual or a community. Events produce changes and alter relationships. The accumulation of all the changes produces a structural transformation.

Self Narrative

The storyteller takes what [s]he tells from experience—[her] own or that reported by others. And [s]he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to [her] tale.7

Walter Benjamin

The sculptures that I created for my thesis exhibition are my tale. My goal is not to re-experience and sculpt explicit memories but to portray a personal sensitivity to substance, a history of actions made upon materials. Phillips writing about Von Rydingsvard’s work eloquently expresses this idea:

The artist is both present and missing; the dialectical pulls viewers towards essential questions of the human condition, yet keeps a narrative specificity carefully masked in the work. … memories may influence the work, they neither inhabit nor become the work.8

Speciation and Silence are my storytellers.

One’s experiences create self-defining narratives. They become visible as one recounts an event to the self and in so doing gives the event personal meaning.

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7 Sugiyama 233-250
8 Phillips 44
Speciation symbolizes self-relevant events. However, Speciation is not explicitly autobiographical, nor is it a journal. Speciation suggests plausible associations. Wool fleece alludes to warmth and comfort, perhaps an acceptance of support. The wet, visceral appearance invites examination. One notices the variations in color and value, a dark gray, perhaps black, pink, orange, green, speckles of yellow. If color signifies emotion, then Speciation exhibits a spectrum of feelings. The condition of the complex layers of skin is also significant. In some sections, the skin is almost non-existent, worn down to the bone. In other areas, damaged skin exists on the cusp of decay, in need of repair. The build up and shedding of the protective skin-like covering reminds one of positive and negative personality traits. Speciation’s narrative is composed of a collection of examined events. Complexities often occur with the joining of multiple examinations. A connection requires additional labor for it to be strong as it is often a pressure point of conflicting views. Unions of the limb-like structures form large bulbous joints, as if they have swelled under pressure. The swollen joints are repeatedly wrapped with twine to bind and hold the pieces together. Weakened and damaged connections also exist. The injurious bonds are unable to hold the limbs together, which sway and show their frailty.

Upon close examination, one takes notice of many oddities and textures in Speciation. ‘Wounds’ are on many of the pieces, in various states of healing. Some wounds, mended with thick black thread, show signs of healing. Layers of new skin have formed and buried old wounds. Other wounds remain open, the skin having attempted to cover and protect. Cloudy and bubbled areas exist as if the skin was
exposed to something toxic. Parasitic attachments reside next to functional appendages. *Speciation* survives as a diverse, varied, and shifting specimen. *Speciation*’s details offer the viewer a personal look at its character. Its gesture is viewable at a greater distance. The intertwining units create arching rhythmic lines that sprawl and suggest growth. *Speciation* is attached to the ceiling and touches the floor. It is dependent upon the confines of the gallery, reflecting the tension that exists between potential growth and logistical limitations.

Reflections of Change

We manufacture meaning out of the rawest materials—out of sickness, war, death, as well as routine events. My drawings on paper trace my reflections on the process of change. They originate from manipulated digital images of *Speciation*. The images were projected onto the paper and selected lines were traced. I then responded to that image. The drawings changed over time. I eliminated the projected image and relied on my direct response to *Speciation*.

Each drawing is unique and grouped with similar drawings. Each grouping displays something a little different from its predecessor. In some drawings, there is a color shift, or an increase use of shadow, or change in line variety. Some drawings are obsessive, others calm. The drawings document the process of change as a slow and diverse progression.

We construct meaning out of complex as well as simple events. We judge, monitor, summarize, and question our thoughts in order to construct meaning. In the

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9 Abernethy and Bole 6
process, we reexamine beliefs. Altered beliefs lead to changes. This time-consuming and varied process allows us occasion for growth, as illustrated in my drawing processes.

CONCLUSION

‘An Oversimplified Construction of a Complex Uncertainty’ considers the process of personal and societal evolution. I ask the viewer to consider the different expressions of Silence and Speciation. Both sculptures as abstract storytellers suggest experiences that contribute to an evolutionary process. *Speciation* and *Silence* are abstract sculptures. Although I geared my initial investigation towards the exploration of personal and societal transformations, other interpretations are possible. *Silence* with its dense, harsh texture may suggest isolation, war, or loneliness without transformation. Likewise, *Speciation* may just suggest an existence, a snapshot in time.

Given the opportunity and providing the willingness, change is possible. Nowhere did I see that more evident than in my drawings. Conscious decisions to alter my method of drawing were required in order to produce change, it did not occur automatically. Similarly, the disassembly and subsequent reassembly of *Speciation* will result in a different structure. I will make conscientious decisions in order to promote change and through change, growth.
Figures

Figure 1
*Arrow of Time*
3’ x 2’ x 1’, 2010,
gut, wood, thread, latex, rope

Figure 2
*An Oversimplified Construction of a Complex Uncertainty* installation view that includes Silence (see figure 3-5), Speciation (see figure 6-13), and drawings (see figures 14-16)
Figure 3
*Silence* (variable dimensions), 2011
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Figure 4
*Silence* (detail), 2011
Figure 5
*Silence* (detail), 2011

Figure 6
*Speciation*, variable dimensions, 2011
wood, wool fleece, silicone, string, metal rod, clamps,
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*Speciation*, variable dimensions, 2011
wood, wool fleece, silicone, string, metal rod, clamps

Figure 8
*Speciation* (detail)
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Speciation (detail)

Figure 12
Speciation (detail)
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Speciation (detail)

Figure 14
Drawings 2011
Acrylic paint, paste, sand, on paper
Figure 15
Drawings 2011
Acrylic paint, paste, sand, on paper

Figure 16
Drawings 2011
Acrylic paint, paste, sand, on paper
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http://www.educationoasis.com/curriculum/Lang_Arts/quotes/quotes_about_poetry.htm

