I Will Follow

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
Marchelle Simms
May, 2013
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS..............................................................................................................iii

LIST OF FIGURES....................................................................................................................iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS............................................................................................................v

BODY.........................................................................................................................................1
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I Will Follow</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I Will Follow (alternate view)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I Will Follow (detail)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Repair</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Repair (alternate view)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Repair (detail)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Trace Series No. 1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Trace Series No. 2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Trace Series No. 3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Trace Series No. 4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family and friends for being extremely supportive throughout this process. Especially my husband Greg, thank you for your encouragement, patience, and love.

Thank you to my advisor Paul O’Keeffe and committee members Isabel Farnsworth, Mark Schatz, and Janice Lessman-Moss for your time and direction.
We all enter this world as part of a cohort. Our family sets us into a role, a position that is prestablished based on our parents position within the family. As adults we grow into or vary our role within the family. Our role is often established by how we perceive or react to familial circumstances and emotional experiences.

I make work that is based on very personal experiences although my experiences may perhaps echo other’s experiences. They are unique to me because I am experiencing them. These experiences shape my perception of life and my work and how I react to my work and my choice of materials.

*I Will Follow*, an exhibition of my thesis work, is a personal yet public investigation into better understanding my role within my family dynamic. My perception of my role within my family has been molded by memories and personal experiences. What is my role as a maker, restorer, historian and am I an essential component to this family?

*I Will Follow*, is not just a direct representation of a specific physical space but also a mental space. This is a trace of connecting the past and present into a continuing dialogue with the space involved and the viewer.

*I Will Follow* (Figure 1), consist of a large table that may be seen as a dining room table, a harvest table but it can also be seen as a desk or conference table. The table was designed after my husband and my grandfather’s desks. For my family every dinner, holiday, or Sunday breakfast discussions about what is happening in our individual lives evolves into a meeting about the business. This is not necessarily a
negative experience but an experience that can bring the family closer. The other side of the meetings can be tense, uncomfortable but for a child growing up in this type of open environment can offer insight into interpersonal communications.

At the head of the table are thick skin like black rubber sheets that roll over a steel frame and cascade across the table spilling down to the floor. The reflective rubber sheets are a representation of the force, my grandfather. They also indicate the succession of our lineage, the creation, or path of the memory that we have all contributed to. It is a traumatic accumulation of the memory and circumstances that for every decision made the question is asked, “What would he do? What would he want?” The rubber sheets are in tension, being pulled apart by metal clamps. The clamps that are pulling the rubber are attached to lines weighted by lead pyramid sinkers. This action represents the deterioration of the memory, the tension felt by the family. Furthering this duality –the rubber is also staked into the table at various points with horseshoe nails. I have created a piece that most accurately describes my desire to freeze and distill the progression of my family influence, the deterioration of memory, and my conflicting emotions regarding my contributions to the strengths and weaknesses of my family.

“You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives.” -Luis Bunuel

It is devastating for a person to lose the memories that have shaped who that person is, who they have become, but once all memory is lost -there is relief and a
return to a child like state for the victim. With the loss of memory for one person comes the unimaginable tragedy for those who remain with remnants of memory that exist through the retelling of family stories. It is here that memories are shaped and shifted into unrecognizable states and the truth of the original memory as held by the victim is gone forever. Those who remain remember the journey of loss and the pain it caused. With memory loss, the real pain resides within the one who still has/holds the memory.

The other side of collecting memories and its deterioration is the saving or reconstructing memory. In Repair (Figure 4) I have collected and sewn grids of scrap rubber into a form that is a kind of tapestry or quilt. Each of these grids becomes an individual memory or thought block. Some of these parts are complete and whole while others are torn and are missing important elements. The scraps of rubber have been desperately repaired by many means of stitching and knotting. (what is important here is that that parts are together) The repetition of form reinforces the accumulation of memories both made and saved. An element of time is revealed through the placement of the sheet of rubber that is hung over a roller made of steel and wood that has been mounted into the wall so that the process of repairing the rubber can continue to occur.

Trace (Figures 7-10), is a series of unaltered digital photographs documenting small elements of the sculptural works in this exhibition. I create small installations using the rubber scraps and layer sheets of colored plastic behind them. The
photographs are shaky, blurred compositions that speak to movement and instability. Anatomy and organisms emerge while alluding to a deeper phenomenological experience.

Families exist as a unit, an entity to themselves. These units are affected by external conditions such as, economics and society. The impacts of these externalities are buffered by the reactions of the internal dynamics of the cohort such as education, profession and health. Over time, these characteristics determine a family’s reach, status, and stability.

Like many other families in my community, my family left their farms and moved to Akron, Ohio to work in the rubber industry one hundred years ago. Akron, the city once known as the rubber capital of the world is home to my family’s business, a research and development laboratory for the rubber and plastics industry. My grandfather, a mathematician and chemist, along with his father started the company in 1962. Today, the majority of my family members including my husband and I, work for this organization. For my family unit, the success of the rubber industry is the external condition that determines our stability. I was raised in this predominately male dominated environment by my mother, the eldest of six children, my great grandparents, and later on my stepfather. My mother’s personal struggle and professional success and reputation have greatly influenced my perceptions. My mother sacrificed greatly to provide for me and in her professional career by choosing a path within the family company in order to support her father’s dreams. Her work with in the family
business is very important to her and the contributions that she has made have contributed to its success. When my great grandfather had a stroke and my great grandmother developed Alzheimer’s Disease, it was my mother who cared for them because this is part of her role—the caretaker, the fixer, she is a problem solver. Each of these choices that she has made profoundly impacted my evolving ideas about who I am, whom I could potentially be, and whom I was expected to become.

Because my mother had to work long hours, I spent most of my childhood with my great grandparents. Responsibilities were placed on me at a young age building my view of my position within this family.

My great grandmother, Louise was a very loving and nurturing person yet also very controlling. From an early age responsibilities were placed on me to remember family stories, some real and some fabricated she said that someday I would be the matriarch of this family and would have to keep the family close. She told family members that my birth saved her life, that I gave her purpose, that she loved me more than anyone else in the world and in many aspects I was a spoiled child. Louise was a painter and had learned how to paint from her mother and grandmother yet she would not allow me to paint. It was the only time I ever remember her telling me no. This was very painful and has stuck with me throughout my life and in some way has contributed to me striving to be a creative adult.

My great grandfather Leo was unlike most men of his generation and felt that women could do anything that men could do. He taught me how to build and how to
use tools. His workshop was a special place and the time that I spent with him instilled a desire for me to create, to construct and a place that I could be creative. I did not grow up with siblings or cousins but was surrounded by adults. My temperament was honed by the interactions with these adults.

The reputation of our family’s business was built on my grandfather’s genius. As his memory deteriorated, from Alzheimer’s disease, like his mother’s and aunt’s, the future success of the business became uncertain. Positions, responsibilities, and roles within the family and business had to change in order to restore and maintain stability. These developments are poignant because as an adult and an artist, I was able to view a fundamental shift in the cohort caused by memory loss and the pull of inspiration for my work.

My creative work including material choice and the evolution of process are directly tied to my personal experiences within my family. I am profoundly influenced by the strength of familial demand echoed in my memories. I am equally influenced by the fear of seeing my loved ones lose there memory and possibly loosing my own memory.

I use rubber in my work because of its pliability, and its fluctuating textures. Rubber is skin-like, dirty and depending on the compound and cure process, can be durable or fragile. Just as my memories can alternate between fragility and cemented truth, rubber posses qualities that can be manipulated to reflect my shifting understanding of the importance of memory, truth and family.
The pieces of rubber that I have chosen to use in my work are cast offs, made incorrectly or are reproduced accidental forms. Rubber can be unpredictable and so each piece of scrap has its own qualities and challenges. By using rubber in my work I feel that I am connected to my family and contributing to my families lineage yet making it my own and creating my own path. It has only been within the past ten years that I have been allowed to use the equipment deemed dangerous by my grandfather. It was his feelings that woman should not put themselves in harms way, unlike the men in my family, “Girls are not supposed to lose their fingers”. I respect the material, its history, good and bad. I am not a chemist or a man so my contributions to the family in this capacity are limited. However I feel that I can contribute in other ways and I want to stay involved to some extent.

My role within my family cohort will continue to adapt and evolve with the ever-changing conditions presented by life. Similarly, I Will Follow will also undergo changes as it is reinstalled in new environments. Each time I Will Follow is installed will certainly be an opportunity to reconsider the purpose of this particular investigation as well as a time for me to personally reconnect with the elements of this work. Ultimately, a re-evaluation of I Will Follow, contemplates my fear of loss of my identity and the loss of those close to me.
Figure 1

*I Will Follow*
Figure 2

*I Will Follow* (alternate view)
Figure 3

*I Will Follow* (detail)
Figure 4

*Repair*
Figure 5

*Repair* (alternate view)
Figure 6

*Repair* (detail)
Figure 7

Trace Series No.1
Figure 8

Trace Series No.2
Figure 9

Trace Series No.3
Figure 10

*Trace Series No.4*