REMEMBERING THROUGH CLOTH

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I would like to thank my advisor, Janice Lessman-Moss, for all of her dedication and devotion in helping me complete my MFA. Her experience and wealth of knowledge has been an anchor to me. I’d like to dedicate this paper to my siblings Ronel and Martin Diergaardt for their support and faith in me. I dedicate this Thesis Project to my deceased brother Gregory Trevor Benade. If not for your love and unequivocal loyalty to your family I would not be who I am today.
INTRODUCTION

THESIS STATEMENT

"Snapshots serve as markers of time and place. They record people and places as a way to preserve memories of significant events or landmarks. In this series of weavings I collage images from photographs as a means to capture a sense of grief generated by the loss of my brother. As a special person who shared so much in my past I wanted to preserve his memory, and my response to his absence, through commemoration in weaving. Digitally generated compositions are made tangible through the process of making the cloth, serving as both a concrete and abstract connection with time. They are meant to create a narrative in remembrance of my deceased brother, Gregory Trevor Benade (1975-2013)."

OUTLINE

Almost two years ago I started working on an idea that centered on the death of someone close to me. I wanted to create a body of work that would help me express the depth of emotion I was feeling. I needed something to help me cope with what I was feeling in order to try to comprehend it and to find a way to move forward. I began exploring ways to make artwork by using imagery from photographs taken at family fun days or gatherings, as well as, miscellaneous pictures that reminded me of my brother during his life and especially his funeral. I combined imagery of gravestones, empty buildings, crosses, figures, with geometric lines, and atmospheric color, to create visual compositions that capture the essence of time and memory prompted by the grief connected with this particular loss.
In the midst of grief I found myself feeling conflicting emotions. In one instance I would experience pain, feeling empty as though I’d lost a significant part of myself. At other times I would feel happy, remembering joyful moments of things I talked about or did with my family. These thoughts were generated by one memory, followed by numerous ensuing memories colliding into one emotional mess. Using this confluence of conflicting emotions I decided to put imagery together in a way that reflected this confusion. So after gathering numerous snapshots of family and other important personal images I scanned them into the computer and used Photoshop© as a tool to manipulate them. The digital environment allowed me to crop, layer, reconfigure and ultimately collage selected aspects of the photos to create totally new compositions, often featuring odd juxtapositions. This process of collaging allowed me to access, express, and bring order to a series of jumbled emotions in a visually engaging, symbolic way. Because the designs were created on the computer, the designs could be easily output on the digital jacquard loom.

Culmination as Cloth

While photographic imagery provided the subject matter for my collages, and the virtual realm a place to design, I wanted to create a body of work that felt more permanent and also had a quality of familiarity to me and other viewers. Working in the textile field for a number of years, it seemed natural to combine my skill with dyeing and my developing knowledge of weaving to express my ideas. Textiles play a significant part in our daily lives. They are something we share but can also be very personal. Threads and cloth carry so many connotations including those associated with familial relationships. Phrases such as “cut from the same cloth”, “to be bonded to”, are sayings that I was raised with. In my African culture, cloth holds significant meaning and is often associated with funerals and memory. By
integrating weaving and dyeing I had the perfect means to make my own commemorative textiles.

Not only does cloth carry meaning, but the process of weaving is also rich with metaphors. Constructing a fabric on the loom requires the repetitive accumulation of threads. Weaving moves forward in a progressive, logical, sequence. This process of making provides a stark contrast to the method of designing in the virtual world of the computer. Both processes reference time, weaving is very ordered and measured moving forward like linear time. Designing in the virtual world of the computer allows for more haphazard connections like the uncertainty of memory. Textile artist, Andrea Donnelly writes: “Through passage of time and rhythm of repetition, the actions of weaving are captured and layered like memory in the buildup of thread upon thread.” (Donnelly, 2006-2014)

While the actual creation of a cloth was an important conceptual component, it was the use of a digital loom that allowed me to realize my detailed photographic imagery. Compositions designed graphically on the computer were reproduced exactly as I planned through the physical connection of threads on the loom. Warp threads are parallel lines held taut while the weft is systematically inserted between the warps by the weaver and the mechanical operation of the loom. In this way the images are embedded in the cloth, they are part of the plane, the physical object. The process therefore allowed me to create a tangible connection using cloth and the process of weaving to turn a memory into a concrete object that is long lasting and real.

Although my interest in replicating the images was primary, success of the piece also depended on the integration of color and pattern. The dynamic movement of the common twill weave structure was used to activate the shapes and field. This pattern is composed of a repetition of diagonal lines revealing a play of texture and value. I varied the width of the lines along with the direction to enhance the
spatial depth in some areas, separate forms, and unify relationships in others. This structural pattern was enhanced by color in the warp threads hand dyed in gradations of atmospheric color to provide the illusion of spatial depth, vary the mood and establish unusual, often mysterious relationships of light and shadow. The coloration in combination with the imagery set the tone for the composition and narrative of each weaving, evoking emotions associated with remembrance.

DETAILS OF THE STORIES
Looking at each weaving, I realize that every one tells its own part of my story, which seen together with the others creates a narrative of commemoration. The various images, culled and collaged from a range of photographic sources combined with the unique attributes of the weaving process, unite the content and visual interest in my compositions.

Figure 1, page 4, tells of a dark time when emotions were intense and conflicting. Diverse images of different scales overlap and are partially obscured by dark colors and lines. There is a solemnity about the weaving that can be associated with architectural decay and abandonment. Architecture tells a story of mortality through time. Decaying brick walls, caved in roofs or abandoned structures reinforce the concept of impermanence. Liebig house, named after Baron Justus von Liebig, a German organic chemist who founded the Karl Liebig Company during the 19th century, provides a perfect example of this. Liebig House sits atop a hill in Namibia, some 20 miles from the capital city, Windhoek. This building came under ownership of photojournalist, Margaret Courtney-Clarke in 1945. However it has been left abandoned for over 50 years and as a result has experienced significant decay. From many visits with family and friends I have come to cherish the solitude and silence that this edifice offers.

Figure 1, page 4, attempts to capture the moodiness of one of the interiors of Liebig House through line and color and to draw attention to the emptiness of the space. In this weaving, Liebig House is used as a
direct a metaphor for home and by extension the deep intense emotion of loss. Throughout the body of work architecture is a key symbol.

Figure 2, page 5, tell a story of a time of loss. The ghostly figure of my brother has a tangible presence as though he is still part of the present. There is calmness about the composition created by the subtle shifts of color. It is suggestive of a quiet afternoon in a cemetery and yet the imagery has odd elements to it. The figure leaning on a railing appears as if from another place, as if he does not quite fit there. His hands and legs suggest that he is a part of the soil he is standing on or rather floating on, making one think that he is a ghost whose body is perhaps in one of the graves around him.

Figure 3, page 6 and figure 4, page 7, have parallel lines of twill pattern push and pull to produce a distortion of the individual components within the composition in order to suggest the illusion of space. Line, in all of the weavings, may suggest spatial depth in some parts of the composition while reinforcing the flatness of the field in others. I think that this duality aptly captures the surreality of memories. Figure 5, page 8, reflect upon memory. The two figures appear pensive as though they are pondering this bright light that envelope them. Here, I wanted to capture a quiet moment that simply invites the viewer to reflect. The mood of this weaving is neither happy nor sad. I wanted to create a moment of stillness that comes only when healing manifests after a time of sorrow.

Finally, Disruption, page 9, a snapshot of me with my three siblings embracing was altered by the introduction of graphic starbursts meant to disrupt this joyful moment. But instead, this intrusion of dynamic shapes serves to heighten the celebration of family unity. The bursts of yellow lines, suggestive of sunlight, ricochets throughout the weaving echoing the smiles and camaraderie evident between the
figures. The vibrancy of the color and line coupled with the smiling faces captures a happy memory. This snapshot is the culmination of family unity, a reminder of happier times.

CONCLUSION

It has been my objective for this thesis project to address remembrance through cloth in honor of my brother. The weavings became a document of my journey through the passing of time and experience of grief. By orchestrating images from my family snapshots, with places and symbols common to everyone, I recognized the value of conveying my story for others to see. The act of weaving allowed me to reconstruct my memories in a positive way. Although the work was generated by a very personal narrative, I think others will find the subject accessible and meaningful.
Figure 1: 1975-2013. 43.25” x 26” (WxH). Digitally designed, hand woven on TC1 digital Jacquard Loom.

10/2 Cotton Perle warp, hand painted with MX Reactive Dyes. 5/2 Cotton Astra weft.
Figure 2: My Grave. 39.25” x 25.5” (WxH). Digitally designed, hand woven on TC1 digital Jacquard Loom.

10/2 Cotton Perle warp, hand painted with MX Reactive Dyes. 5/2 Cotton Astra weft.
Figure 3: What Do I Do Without You. 36” x 26” (WxH). Digitally designed, hand woven on TC1 digital Jacquard Loom. 10/2 Cotton Perle warp, hand painted with MX Reactive Dyes. 5/2 Cotton Astra weft.
Figure 4: Conversation. 35.5” x 25.5” (WxH). Digitally designed, hand woven on TC1 digital Jacquard Loom. 10/2 Cotton Perle warp, hand painted with MX Reactive Dyes. 5/2 Cotton Astra weft.
Figure 5: Quiet Moment. 36” x 27” (WxH). Digitally designed, hand woven on TC1 digital Jacquard Loom.

10/2 Cotton Perle warp, hand painted with MX Reactive Dyes. 5/2 Cotton Astra weft.
Figure 6: Disruption. 35” x 26” (WxH).Digitally designed, hand woven on TC1 digital Jacquard Loom.

10/2 Cotton Perle warp, hand painted with MX Reactive Dyes. 5/2 Cotton Astra weft.
REFERENCES