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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my friends Rene Rasy and Chesa Sevestopoulos for being my personal cheerleaders and listening without judgement to every complaint and heart ache as well as every celebration, my doctor Richard Figler for being patient with me as I pushed through my healing process to complete my artistic explorations towards my degree, to my professors, Darice Polo and Gianna Commoto, for also being patient, understanding and flexible with me as I negotiated life + art + teaching and more, and to my family, my mother, Carrie Rodick, my step-father, Frank Rodick, my dad, Rick Adorjan and my brother Jesse Adorjan for your love and support always.
June of 2013, just before starting my first year at KSU as a graduate student I suffered an accident while zip lining. My head hit and dragged on the ground resulting in multiple concussions and a bruised spinal cord [Fig. 1]. This caused various symptoms including headaches, pain in my neck, shoulders, elbows, legs and feet, sensitivity to light and noise, dizziness, blurred vision, trouble concentrating, depression, mood swings, irritability, chronic fatigue and insomnia. Any activities involving the brain exasperated symptoms and sleep was the only thing that remedied them. As of writing this I am still suffering these symptoms however less frequently and to lesser degree.

About a month into the first semester I had an MRI and was able to view images of my brain, skull, neck and spine. I had to wear sunglasses in my art history class because viewing projected images for 2 hours triggered symptoms. Looking back on this first semester I can barely remember it. I was still concussed and my symptoms were triggered every day. I had to change so much about how I worked and went about everyday tasks. Multi-tasking was no longer possible for me. My physical limitations directly affected my process and approaches to material so I had to negotiate how I could work within my means but stay true to my vision while allowing me to relax and heal.

I found that working with my whole body, using gestural marks, standing and moving around was beneficial to keeping my neck, shoulders and arms strong and flexible. My mental and physical health issues are imbued within the subject matter and also affected the execution of
my thesis work. It was a constant consideration underlying every decision I made in the last two years. However, I challenged myself to work with an archetypal theme of self-discovery, recovery and transcendence to articulate a personal experience.

A phenomenon occurs when one is focused on one idea that they begin to see it everywhere. It might be because my own mental health needed extra care and attention that I became aware of many others who also struggle with mental illness. The *Unmonumental* catalogue is an example of contemporary artists who investigate and articulate our fractured post-modern collective mind and personal mental struggles. The timeline in the back of the book was enough to bring me to tears in an anxious panic attack. In the 21st century it is only natural to make art work that both probes and gives voice to the fractured, scattered and distracted mind. I am also interested in discovering and actuating ways to cope and I have found self-empowerment, self-care and freedom to be paramount in the healing process. These coping skills that made this work possible was totally in alignment with my philosophy on art making: *do whatever you want but don’t be afraid to follow yourself through the darkness of the unknown.*
SKELETON WOMAN: TO EMBRACE THE UNKNOWN ALLOWS FOR SURPRISES

Introduction

"She had done something of which her father disapproved, although no one remembered any longer what it was. But her father had dragged her to the cliffs and thrown her over and into the sea. There, the fish ate her flesh away and plucked out her eyes. As she lay under the sea, her skeleton turned over and over in the currents. One day a fisherman came fishing, [he] did not know that the local fishermen stayed away, saying this inlet was haunted. The fisherman's hook drifted down through the water, and caught, of all places, in the bones of Skeleton Woman's rib cage."¹

Skeleton Woman: To Embrace the Unknown Allows For Surprises represents a culmination of my most experimental processes and predominant experiences of my graduate studies. It was a temporary installation using drawing, painting and assemblage techniques to create a chaotic atmosphere that initially surrounds and provokes the viewer [Fig. 2]. The overarching chaos gives way to an underlying rhythmic order for the viewer to discover and appreciate with close consideration to details [Fig. 3]. Through the installation process, I explored themes such as destruction, recovery, light, dark, accumulation, loss, activity and passivity. I seek to challenge common associative notions of duality in a playful manner; a way of art making that has historical ties to Dada and Zen Buddhism.²

I chose the tale of The Skeleton Woman³ as a working theme to interpret loosely in the process of building an environment. The Skeleton Woman’s tale is an allegory for the mental/emotional process of fear and death transformed into love and life through an act of compassion.
The Skeleton Woman is an archetypal symbol of the Life/Death/Life cycle referred to by author Clarissa Pinkola Estes in her book, *Women Who Run With Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. The tale is of a fisherman who finds The Skeleton Woman on the end of his fishing line. The fisherman or hunter is an archetypal symbol for the seeker, one looking to gain knowledge and wisdom. Through life experience we gain knowledge and wisdom, yet we often wish to avoid and ignore the presence of death in our daily lives. When the fisherman catches the Skeleton Woman on his line, the harsh reality of death rushes into the seeker’s scope of awareness; her bones represent all that is non-beautiful in life. She is also Lady Death and when “…she surfaces, like it or not, for without her there can be no real knowledge of life, and without knowing…there can be no real love or devotion. Love costs. It costs bravery” (Estes, p. 149).

My intent was to express personal struggle and growth through an investigation into the use of intuitive play, an embrace of beautiful elements (such as rice paper, pastel colors, sand, images of stars and shells) in combination with non-beautiful techniques (such as tearing, dripping, seeping, splashing and scribbling). Just as the fisherman goes beyond his fear and restores the bones and life of the Skeleton Woman, I offer an experience to the viewer to untangle the visual and symbolic relationships to make sense of a seemingly convoluted process [Fig. 4].

**Statement**

In the studio, I posture myself in a very relaxed and playful manner. I allow chance, accident and dysfunction into my process in an effort to release some level of control over the outcome of any given project. I find when I am responding intuitively to each decision or at least considering the random ideas that seem to pop up while working, that my art work is enriched with refreshing innovations and unusual relationships. While investigating intuition
and its functions in art making, I found it to be like a muscle that can be flexed, strengthened and tested. I observed that when I feel I am using my intuition most in making art is when I have established a rhythm and allow myself the freedom to explore of the limits of that rhythm and my own sensibilities. Following the rhythm of play between opposing forces of order and disorder, containment and looseness, is something that comes naturally to artists because it is the rhythm of life: of sleep and waking, night and day. I am interested in following that rhythm until the meanings and associations of these opposite forces are exchanged and ultimately nullified. This rhythm between logic and chaos becomes a driving and generative force for me; the Dadaists also saw the opposition of logic and chaos as equivalent and inseparable. By fostering a studio process that allowed for spontaneity, chance and instinct, I learned that the use of intuition allows the artist to position herself on the edge of playful discovery.

Anti-aesthetic or non-beautiful elements are major components in my work that speaks as a metaphor for the process of acceptance. Death and non-beauty are not only accepted as an integral part of my life but understood as the mystery that generates and incubates new life. My studio process reflects the process of coping with disaster and rising up and out of it transformed. Meaning is constantly shifting based on our point of view. Shifting meanings is something I embrace, encourage and strive for. Paint spilled on the floor can be soaked up in fabric or paper to create a dramatic and naturalistic indexical mark to be used as the background of a drawing [Fig. 5]. A disaster becomes a serendipitous occasion in the studio. This process reflects my own ways of coping with death, dysfunction and pain. The intersection of intuitive process, choice of material, scale, metaphor and personal experience and struggle is exactly where my thesis work exists sandwiched in an elaborate strata of meaning.
Method

Prior to entering graduate school, the majority of my art work was miniature in scale. I had established a visual language through the use of small scraps of paper, fabric, fiber glass and wood. Readymade objects and ephemera found in passing or in discount stores allowed me to venture into areas of assemblage and bas relief [Fig. 6]. I see the wasted byproducts of mundane life (such as box tops and scrap paper) as raw material to be processed or up-cycled\(^1\) into art objects. Historically, the Dadaists, Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenburg and Kurt Schwitters used objects that were mass produced and readily available to collapse multiple associations into a single form. I am also drawn to the potential for layered meaning, absurdity, and confusion that using readymade objects and found material offers. Using the visual language of assemblage allows me to transcend my own particular narrative and collected objects connect me to an unknown source. Detritus is gathered, mapped, catalogued and used to my benefit. My sensitivity to material lends itself to the miniature and medium scale. Working at a small scale is economical and easy to negotiate in my personal studio practice. However, one of my challenges was to explore a variety of scale and this drove me to further explore the space as a frame.

Skeleton Woman is the largest work in size to date; a continuous assemblage that fills the entire space of a gallery. Throughout my studio hours I completed nine temporary wall installations utilizing assemblage and collage with plenty of unfinished experiments in between [Fig. 7]. Most of them were singular works within the frame of the wall that supported it. Two works extended onto two or more walls (Lake Olson and The Downtown Gallery Window) [Fig. 8]. I find that working on the walls requires more consideration to the room as a framing device. As much as I intellectually anticipated this shift I had never really worked in this manner on any
serious level. I wanted to challenge myself to use the entirety of a space. I selected the Painting Gallery in the School of Art to house my thesis exhibition. The size and light conditions of this gallery lend themselves towards a more intimate setting. I found that the architecture did not have any other notable or unique qualities. The rooms and walls simply became edges to work within; I broke out of one frame only to find myself within a larger frame and realized the futility of such a struggle. I don’t really consider this installation to be site specific. The emphasis is not on the characteristics of the existing space but rather creating an alternative environment that only exists for a short period of time. I sought to invoke the spirit of the Skeleton Woman tale of transformation to approach the space in a way that occupies the space rather than comments on its structure or significance.

I invited my Drawing 1 class to draw directly on the walls with graphite as an assignment [Fig. 9]. I was able to show my students that drawing can be expressed in a very active way that uses the whole range of their bodies. We focused on ellipses, straight lines and various mark making processes to create a value scale within the whole gallery. We covered the walls in graphite lines and blended the marks with rags and water to create an immersive gradient within the whole space. The collaboration was extremely enjoyable for everyone.

When I returned to the gallery to work privately I had a moment of panic, here is my chance to respond to this huge decision I just made and I found myself in a flood of fear and anxiety. What had I done? I now had an overwhelming wall treatment to deal with.\(^5\) I responded with bold lines of acrylic paint to create a connective line drawing on all four walls. They became like bones however, they were not sculptural or representative I also began to edit the original graphite drawing by blocking it out with white and black paint in certain sections. I proceeded to introduce three sections of assemblage that I had prepared for this project. These
sections served as a jumping off point that I could respond to and play with, rearranging once in the gallery. Play is the activity that drives my work so there is no need for any specific objective or outcome. In play, it is the process and activity that takes precedence. Even collecting is a kind of play or challenge to see if and how I might transform the material I gather. The motion of my body became almost like a dance as I spiraled around the room hanging papers and wood panels and rearranging ephemera to create unexpected relationships. The torn edges and unusual combinations of elements speak to the dysfunction and loosely represent The Skeleton Woman or the idea of death within life. The soft tones and sensitive use of material, such as a page torn from a book or a sheet of stickers, that acknowledged its original form unchanged by my hand but highlighted in its use. The dim lighting is meant to soften the harshness of the scattered materials and gestural lines [Fig. 10]. Whimsical elements such as pastel colors, finely drawn lines, glitter, sand and clothing speak to my own taste and personality which anchors the universal theme to my own personal narrative.

The piles of ephemera, detritus, drawings, collages and readymade objects I had collected fit a loose criteria mainly based upon the weight of the material. I use a lot of paper because it is light weight and I enjoy the texture. Pages torn from books and magazines refer to galaxies, sea life, and other natural phenomenon to highlight the pulse of life that continues despite our private struggles. Small wood panels and canvases, paper, cardboard, tooling, plastic, Mylar and paint were chosen as materials because of their ease of manipulation. Because of physical restrictions I use materials in a passive way by leaning them or sticking them to the wall with tape. I investigated the temporary nature of working in such a way and found the construction and destruction of the materials becomes a feedback cycle that creates yet another pile of ephemera to be used in the future. I transform collected materials by juxtaposition and incorporating them
into painted or drawn sections of my work. However, I do so very lightly by allowing some of the readymade or found objects original form to shine through.

I looked at several influential artists and observed how others use readymade materials, assemblage, painting and drawing to intervene in a gallery space. Fran Siegle, Wangechi Mutu and Sarah Cain are contemporary artists who work in starkly different manners but who use diverse materials and the language of painting and drawing to intervene or acknowledge the space [Fig. 11]. I also viewed Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and took inspiration for the creation of a temporary alternative space.

Outcome

It is a human characteristic to seek the meaning of events that impact and transform our lives. I set out to illustrate my experience of creating meaning in spite of a debilitating struggle and recurrent upheavals. Anchoring my thesis exhibition to the allegorical tale of the Skeleton Woman allowed me a methodical structure to work within. The week spent playfully arranging, rearranging and assembling my chosen materials resulted in a temporary installation that surrounded the viewer in a mystifying display of energetic marks and a quiet cataclysm of diverse ephemera. The synthesis of dualistic ideas such as light and dark, rough and soft etc. reinforced the idea of the Life/Death/Life cycle which is central to the story of the Skeleton Woman. The viewer became like the fisherman, stumbling upon his quest for wisdom from the depths of his psyche. I challenged the viewer to make sense of an overwhelming amount of information that only had small moments of cohesion. It was my hope that the initial response to the environment as a whole shifted as the viewer unraveled intelligible connections and relationships.
The fisherman thought, ‘Oh, now I’ve got a really big one! And as he struggled with this great weight on the end of the hook, the sea was stirred to a thrashing froth, and his kayak bucked and shook, for she who was beneath struggled to disentangle herself. And the more she struggled, the more she tangled in the line. No matter what she did, she was inexorably dragged upward, tugged up by the bones of her own ribs.

No matter which way he zigged his kayak, she stayed right behind, and her breath rolled over the water in clouds of steam, and her arms flailed out as though to snatch him down into the depths. “Agh!” he wailed as he ran aground. In one leap he was out of his kayak, clutching his fishing stick and running, and the coral white corpse of skeleton woman, still snagged in the fishing line, bumpety-bumped behind right after him. Over the rocks he ran, and she followed. Over the frozen tundra he ran, and she kept right up. Finally, the man reached his snowhouse and dove right into the tunnel and on hands and knees scrambled his way into the interior. Panting and sobbing he lay there in the dark, his heart a drum, a mighty drum. Safe at last, oh so safe, yes, safe thank the Gods, Raven, yes, thank Raven, yes, and all bountiful Sedna, safe… at…last. Imagine when he lit his whale oil lamp, there she – it – lay in a tumble upon his snow floor, one heel over her shoulder, one knee inside her rib cage, one foot over her elbow.

He could not say later what it was, perhaps the firelight softened her features, or the fact that he was a lonely man… but a feeling of some kindness came into his breathing, and slowly he reached out his grimy hands and using words softly like a mother to child, began to untangle her from the fishing line. “Oh, na, na, na.” First he untangled the toes, then the ankles. “Oh, na, na, na.” On and on he worked into the night, until dressing her in furs to keep her warm, Skeleton Woman’s bones were all in the order a human’s should be.

He felt into his leather cuffs for his flint and used some of his hair to light a little more fire. He gazed at her from time to time as he oiled the precious wood of his fishing stick and rewound the gut line. And she in the furs uttered not a word – she did not dare – lest this hunter take her out and throw her down to the rocks and break her bones to pieces utterly. The man became drowsy, slid under his sleeping skins, and soon was dreaming. And sometimes as humans sleep, you know, a tear escapes from the dreamer’s eye; we never know what sort of dream causes this, but we know it is either a dream of sadness or longing. And this is what happened to the man. Skeleton Woman saw the tear glisten in the firelight and she became suddenly so thirsty. She tinkled and clanked and crawled over to the sleeping man and put her mouth to his tear.

The single tear was like a river and she drank and drank and drank until her many-years-long thirst was slaked. While lying beside him, she reached inside the sleeping man and took out his heart, the mighty drum. She sat up and banged on both sides of it: Bom Bomm!…..Bom.
Bom! As she drummed, she began to sing out “Flesh, flesh, flesh! Flesh, Flesh, Flesh!” And the more she sang, the more her body filled out with flesh. She sang for hair and good eyes and nice fat hands. She sang the divide between her legs, and breasts long enough to wrap for warmth, and all the things a woman needs. And when she was all done, she also sang the sleeping man’s clothes off and crept into his bed, skin against skin.

She returned the great drum, his heart, to his body, and that is how they awakened, wrapped one around the other, tangled from their night, in another way now, a good and lasting way. The people who cannot remember how she came to her first ill fortune say she and the fisherman went away and were consistently well fed by the creatures she had known in her life under water. The people say that it is true and that is all they know.” (Estes, 139-141).

2 “[Dada] points to a period in which brilliant and daring, if sometimes irresponsible, minds totally fragmented or altered traditional and even advanced modes. Perhaps even more important: finally with authority—and for the first time in Western thought—dada substituted nonrational metaphysic of oppositions for a rationalized hierarchy of values. As a consequence it accorded uns sureness, accident, confusion, disunity, and discontinuity a share of the attention formerly reserved for what had been commonly regarded as moral opposites, and released a constellation of physical and intellectual energies through which and artist could (and still can) operate in a way that, at least in the West, was previously impossible. By a dynamism inherent in human experience, moreover, the recognition of live reciprocity turns the mind toward and indefinable central principle as transparent and vital as the Tao in Chinese though and art. It was the knowledge of dada, in part, which led certain modern artists, after 1945, toward Zen Buddhism” (Seitz, 37).

3 The image of a woman’s skeleton also resonates with my own personal hurdles and health issues stemming from my accident. When I saw multiple x-rays of my bones and brain it was very impactful emotionally. That awareness, of my skeletal and nervous systems, sparked a natural curiosity and an experience of a mysterious order.

4 “Life/Death/Life cycle nature is a cycle of animation, development, decline and death that is always followed by re-animation. This cycle affects all physical life and all facets of psychological life.

5 To allow myself to move forward I had to relax and intentionally create an attitude of confidence in my own decisions. This was a moment when my thesis inquiries into the function and action of intuition were occurring in real time. I had to apply what I had learned in order to complete my exhibition. I learned that I could shift gears mentally in order to grant my intuitive mind a dominate place in my thought processes. This is mainly achieved by relaxing, visualization and breathing techniques and these techniques are very similar to coping skills my doctor gave me for when my symptoms are triggered or I am fatigued. I have been attempting to
tailor my own studio process to bolster my healing process. Whether I have succeeded is yet to be determined.
REFERENCES


Figure 1

My zip lining accident June 15, 2013
Figure 2

_Skeleton Woman: To Embrace The Unknown Allows For Surprises_

Installation view
Figure 3

*Skeleton Woman: To Embrace The Unknown Allows For Surprises*

Detail

Paper, acrylic paint, graphite
Figure 4

*Skeleton Woman: To Embrace The Unknown Allows For Surprises*

**Detail**

Graphite, acrylic paint, cotton fabric, rice paper, string, Mylar, plastic netting, negative transparency, stickers, canvas, wood panel, clothing
Figure 5

*Simple Wish* 2014

14”x 8”
Cotton fabric, acrylic paint, wood
Figure 6

*Baby Art* 2010

5”x 3”
Drift wood, glitter, plastic, wood, gem, cardboard
Figure 7

*Cracking Open, Bringing Forth* 2014

Lamnolem, paper, acrylic paint, thread, Mylar, cardboard
Figure 8

Installation in progress in my studio in Lake Olson Graduate Painting Studios (2014)
Figure 9

Installation in progress

*Skeleton Woman: To Embrace The Unknown Allows For Surprises*
Figure 10

_Skeleton Woman: To Embrace The Unknown Allows For Surprises_

Detail

Paper, wood panel, acrylic paint, aged latex paint, plastic, sand
Figure 11

Sarah Cain
*Killing Me Softly* 2013