MYSTERY, MAGIC AND POSSIBILITIES

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Masters of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
Joann Strunk

Graduate Program in Art

The Ohio State University
2010

Thesis Committee:
Charles Massey, Jr., Advisor
Dorothy Noyes
Sergio Soave
ABSTRACT

I work in a variety of media: drawing, painting, printmaking, bookmaking, and recently, works that incorporate elements of installation and performance. I see my work as an experiment in progress—a way of investigating my interests and of organizing and manifesting my ideas. My art is connected to my interest in storytelling and I draw my subjects from a variety of sources. In this thesis I will look at the influences and ideas that inspire and inform my work.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Charles Massey, Jr., Dorothy Noyes
and Sergio Soave for their guidance and support in my throughout my masters program at Ohio State University.
VITA

May 1991……………………………………………A.S. Somerset Community College

May 2008……………………………………………B.F.A., B.A. University of Kentucky

September 2009 – Present…………………………..Graduate Teaching Associate,

Department of Art, The Ohio State University

Field of Study

Major Field: Art

Area of Emphasis: Printmaking
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ...................................................................................................................ii
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................iii
Vita............................................................................................................................iv
Introduction ...............................................................................................................1
Printmaking ...............................................................................................................4
Books .......................................................................................................................7
Mixed Media ............................................................................................................14
Conclusion ................................................................................................................24
Bibliography ............................................................................................................25
Appendix: Images ....................................................................................................26
INTRODUCTION

I had been making art for thirty-plus years before I had my first formal art class. I just worked with whatever materials were at hand. Both my father and grandmother were craftspeople, and as a child I carved figures out of the pieces of wood left over from Dad’s work and made things from the fabric scraps my grandma had no use for. No matter what happened in the following years, I kept, as my family put it, “making things.” I drew on scraps of paper and made things out of whatever materials were on hand: scraps from the sewing factory where I worked or leftover brick and wood from my construction job. I do not know what has and continues to drive this compulsion. Perhaps, as someone (I can not remember who) once said, all art making stems from a sense of incompleteness, and I will not argue with that. If I were perfect in a perfect world, I would have no need to make anything at all. I like my Professor’s, Charles Massey Jr., philosophy better in stating that we are simply making visible something that we want or need to see but do not see in the world around us. I will add to it that I am often sharing with others something that I have seen and that I think is worth sharing. My art is connected to a tradition of storytelling, which has always been an important part of my life. I grew up listening to stories and reading. My mother tells me that I began reading at age four and I have never stopped. I have liked anything to do with the natural
sciences, plants, animals, the earth and the traditions and beliefs of other peoples. I love mythology, especially the animistic legends of Native American peoples, and fairy tales. I absorb the stories I read, perhaps too well. The characters were real to me, and I saw their traits in people I knew. I saw the spirits and the magic at work in the world around me. My first contact with images would likely have been the illustrations in books, an influence that is still visible in my drawing and prints then and now. There is a close tie between the stories we tell and our visual arts; they are two manifestations of the same compulsion.

In my work I am creating a mythology. I am questioning; although I seldom find answers - perhaps there are none to be found. I am searching for deeper meanings behind the objects and events of everyday life, and, corny as it may sound, I am searching for evidence of existence on a higher, spiritual plane. The world is full of mystery, and it is to the mysterious, the intangible and the unknowable that I am attracted. Images from the natural world reoccur through my work and in doing so become a symbolic language. I am not interested in just creating realism, but it is important that the images I make be recognizable because it carries a meaning that is necessary to the pieces I make as a whole. I am interested in complexity, layers and repetition; an object becomes a theme and carries its meaning across any number of the works I create. I chose colors that are natural and muted or ones that are inherent in the materials I use. This provides a sort of neutral territory for the images. In my drawing I focus on line and contour and the spaces that they are used to create. I developed my drawing technique and overall style long before I ever took a drawing class, and I suspect that, even if I should even feel a need to do so, I would find it an extreme effort to change.
However, my ideas about art making, of course, *have* changed since I formally started studying art, and they have changed drastically in my thesis work. I am still “making things,” but the nature of the things I make has changed along with my ideas about what art can be. When I came here to The Ohio State University, I had absorbed some old fashioned notions about art making. Art was supposed to result in an object, a monument to a finished (and polished) thought. And I had listened to well-meaning people who told me that I needed to focus, to pick an area of specialization, to settle down, so to speak (I have experimented in a variety of media: painting, drawing, fiber, printmaking and mixed media to name a few), and I had decided that, if I had to choose, I would be a printmaker. There is plenty of wiggle room in that choice, but it has proven not to be enough. For years my art-making had been a solitary pursuit, something I did alone and shared with only a few of those close to me. I looked at the work of outsider artists, and I identified with those who could fall into that group in a certain way, including William Blake and Vincent van Gogh, people who had a strong personal vision driving their work, and none seem to be limited to just one way to work. My own struggle has been to share my personal vision in a way that is meaningful to others, and my solution to accomplish this has been and still is to draw them into my work as participants, to let them become part of the work in some way. That has never been limited to one way of doing it.

In this thesis I focus on the work I exhibited in the thesis show. I will attempt to clarify my connection to the methods I have used and the complex and what might be seen as the messy thought processes that are behind it. I will include observations about the use of the printmaking processes and my prints. I have not given up on printmaking.
(or anything else for that matter) because it is too important to me and still has much of value to offer in support of what I do in my work. It would be more accurate to say that I have expanded to include more than one way to share with others something that I have seen and that I think is worth sharing.

O.K… I know … this introduction is getting too long, so I will write a thesis now.

PRINTMAKING

"Prints mimic what we are as humans: we are all the same and yet every one is different. I think there's a spiritual power in repetition, a devotional quality, like saying rosaries." – Kiki Smith (Zelmati 2003).

I was first attracted to printmaking as a means of producing multiples of my drawings. While this is less important to me now, it is still an essential part of some of my other projects. Printing is a powerful process that has changed the course of history by allowing ideas to be accessed simultaneously by many people. A print suggests, not only that it is a multiple, but it leads the whole tradition of sharing information and the myriad associations and points of view that go along with it. Even if the print is framed and hung on the wall, there is the sense, unlike, say, a painting or a sculpture, that it could be picked up, handled, turned over, and passed along to someone else. A print is specific, the planned outcome of a deliberate process, and it is familiar; we see printed information everyday. A print is closely akin to a book. On a more sinister note, it is also a cousin to the pound or two of stuff one received in the mail this morning. O.K….O.K…I did not
set out to write a history of printing or to critique our consumerist ways. This is supposed to be a thesis.

In general, a print suggests an outcome that was decided before it was made. However, this is not the case with mine. I begin by drawing directly onto the ground with the needle, seldom doing preliminary sketches. I build the images in stages, adding information and pulling proofs after each adjustment. In this way the image is allowed to evolve with each proof informing the next step. In my intaglio prints, I use an assortment of processes, aquatints and lift grounds, and I like to experiment to get rich and varied textures. Sometimes, before I am satisfied, the plate will look more like a bas-relief than an intaglio plate. Since the outcome was not precisely planned, it functions both as a finished image and a record of the process of making it.

This was the case with *untitled* (Figures 1 and 2). This etching presents a collection of approximately one hundred owl symbols (there may be a few less or more, but I refuse to count them.) The owls are scattered randomly throughout the image. A light, uneven aquatint fills the areas between them, creating a hazy atmosphere through which feathers float. They are small (none are over three inches, some less than on-half inch) compared to the twenty-two inch by thirty inch paper on which they are printed, giving them room to exist and, for some, even to fly. This print functions as a collection of owls coming from a variety of sources from Picasso to an unknown Aleut, totem pole artist. It is here that I am visualizing the mythology of the owl and reflecting on an array of perceptions of the same idea in order to both see and share a fuller view of this creature as it has been seen and considered by me.
Owls have reoccurred in my work. I am interested in them for the symbolism, myth and mystery associated with them and because the owl and I have a personal bond. My fascination with the owl first began with a clock and a sarcastic remark from my sister. It was New Years Eve and a group of family and friends were seeing in the New Year at my sister’s house. As midnight approached, we were making our resolutions for the upcoming year and my sister, who puts little stock in resolutions, was getting disgusted with us. She had a clock that chimed the hour with bird calls, and the bird of midnight was the Great Horned Owl. As the clock hooted midnight she made her resolution, “I will think about owls more!”

I had a job that year sitting behind a desk waiting for the phone to ring so I filled the empty hours making a book for her. It was, I stated, to help her fulfill her vow, a hand-drawn and lettered collection of owl facts, trivia and stories. As I researched the book, I appreciated more and more the owl and its place in our imaginations.

Owls are nocturnal, which makes them unique among birds, and as a result, there is a rich body of mythology surrounding the owl in many cultures throughout history and around the world. As birds of the night, they are creatures of mystery, and many of the legends, myths and superstitions surrounding the owl give it an undeserved bad reputation. They are often associated with evil deeds, witchcraft and death and considered a bad omen. They have often been killed to avert the bad luck they bring or for the magic their bodies hold. Other cultures are more open-minded: they associate owls with wisdom, with bringing good news and protecting the unwary. Owls are associated with knowledge, magic, the night and the unknown and with such attributes it is hardly surprising that such interesting women as Athena and Lillith had owls for companions.
The legends of Native American peoples give the owl the ability to fly between the material and spirit worlds, fitting, I think, because although they are a part of our world, we seldom actually see one (there is one within a mile of you right now!) The owl totem spirit has, among other powers, the ability to help one see through masks and discover hidden knowledge and truths. They are also simply one of the most beautiful of birds.

Enough—this is a thesis, not an ornithology lesson.

I killed the first owl I ever saw. I was driving home at four am one autumn morning when something hit my windshield. I stopped to investigate and discovered that a small snowy owl had flown into the car. It was the most beautiful creature that I had ever seen, and I was heartbroken that it was dead—and I was the murderer. I have encountered them often since then, perhaps because now I am looking for them. Strangely, at the time I was making the Book of Owls, a Great Horned owl moved into a tree across the street from my house. Coincidentally, it was a summer of discovering secrets for me. The spirit of the owl came, as totem spirits do, stayed with me a while, then flew away when its powers were no longer needed. I have adopted the owl as my animal spirit guide—or perhaps it adopted me.

BOOKS

A book is a collection of printed material, but it is also a world, in a sense a portal into the thoughts of the creator. It is self-contained and accessible, creating an intimate link between the maker and a viewer. It is a relationship that must be sought by a viewer; they must, in order to experience the contents, pick up and open the book. Books hold
power, and for me they have a sense of mystery and allure that an electronic media can never possess. For me it has been a short journey from printmaking to bookmaking because, in a sense, I have always made books. Even as a child, I journaled, scrapbooked, and wrote and illustrated stories for family and friends. I discovered artist’s books (Figure 3.) as an undergraduate student and took a bookmaking class at the University of Kentucky with Dr. Jim Foose. I found that the book, as a form, worked well with some of my ideas. An individual does not get the whole picture at once with a book, but the narrative builds on itself in a sequence; one thing leads to the next, and sometimes one must read between the lines (come to some kind of conclusion as a result of what was on the lines.) Since then bookmaking is becoming an increasing important part of my art practice.

The book that I created for the Thesis Show, (Figures 3 and 4.) is a time line, a visualization of the time that has passed since the beginning of our universe. The represents the sub-microscopic particle that suddenly, for reasons unknown, expanded to create our universe. Since scientists disagree about just how long ago this occurred (or if, in fact, it occurred at all), I chose a median figure of fourteen and one-half billion years. I represented this number with a time-line drawn across a white, folded page with one inch equal to 100,000,000 million years (with ten thousand of those inches required to make one billion.) I can not picture 100,000,000 million years, much less fourteen and one-half billion. My mind balks. It has nothing to fasten such a concept onto and rebels against comprehending something so far beyond its own much smaller experiences. I experience a sense of vertigo when I look up into the night sky and try to comprehend how far away a light year is, or even to picture the mere two hundred million years since the dinosaurs
roamed on this planet. I have found that sometimes spending a little time with an idea can bring deeper understanding, even without further study, as if simply spending time with an idea somehow allows the brain to absorb it. Maybe the act of making this object, a to-scale graph of this enormous stretch of time, would help me to visualize it and then able to share that with others.

Fully unfolded, the book’s pages are almost one-hundred and twenty-five feet long. Folded accordion style, it fits into a small box covered in the same black material as the covers of the book. The timeline, text and illustrations are hand drawn. The time spent on the monotonous tasks of cutting the pages, drawing the line, tracing the letters and numbers were a time of reflection, an attempt to absorb the enormous span of time. I am not sure how well it succeeded, I am still not comfortable with the concept, but it did succeed as a lesson in humility, illustrating just how insignificant I, humanity, and life itself really are (just a small fraction of the last one inch section on the last of the one-hundred and forty-five pages) when viewed from the perspective of eternity.

It is humbling to consider that while time, that mysterious substance, exists in such quantities, I am allotted so little of it, a mere seventy-five years or so at best. How am I to even begin to make sense of it all in the short span of time represented by a few mere molecules of ink? It does not seem right. It seems especially unfair to those who die without experiencing life at all, or those who are sentenced to a horrible life due to illness or a variety of other circumstances. There must be more to existence than this one shot, one birth and one death. I must choose to believe this even if it is just a fantasy. Otherwise existence is pointless, just random chaos, a struggle to survive and reproduce
(for what?) in a dead, uncaring universe. In the face of the terror of living such a life, I would just lie down and let the earth cover me.

O.K., O.K – this is a thesis, not an existential rant. I will just go take some anti-depressants now.

*Intuition* (Figures 5 and 6) is an altered book or perhaps a mixed media object that contains a book. Here I am playing with the idea of what a book can be… is it a book even though it can not be opened and examined like most books? It is a book because it is the idea of a book, or is it an object that contains a book? (I have reached no conclusions about the matter; if you have the answer please let me know!) The book is encased in a female, human torso made of wax. Inside, along with the book, are various natural objects: budded walnut branches, dried hummingbird vines and pods from a Rose of Sharon, both plants that have a personal, symbolic meaning for me. They are not readily apparent; the surface, opaque in areas, approaching translucence in others, offers only hints of the objects inside; one edge of the book and a couple of small areas of text are visible. I chose wax for the figure for several reasons; it is an ambiguous material that can be at once rough and very smooth, translucence and opaque, and there is a fleshly quality to the oily surface. It reveals, but it does not reveal all. One can see that there is something inside the figure, but they can not be sure what it is or what it means.

I had, some years ago, made a smaller wax piece and was intrigued by the material. Even then I wanted to make a larger piece, and I envisioned it as a female human figure, a fragment from an unnamed ancient civilization. When the idea had
ripened, I started with making a mold and decided to use myself for the model so the piece is in one sense a self portrait, although it represents a much more general idea.

I enlisted my daughter’s help with the mold making, and she had (in my opinion) far too much fun, shaking with suppressed laughter as she wrapped my body with cold, wet plaster gauze, the material doctors use to set broken limbs. She took advantage of the chance to get even with me for who knows how many past wrongs. The experience was not so amusing for me. Feeling the gauze harden around my body, rendering me motionless and helpless until it was removed was frightening. It has enforced my resolve to never need a full body cast.

The title of the book inside was not important to me or to the meaning of the piece. I choose it for its size – it fit into the cavity of the torso mold. It is simply a text, representing the knowledge held in body, both acquired from the environment and passed from mother to daughter with genes, so close to the core of identity that we are almost unaware it is there. I am intrigued by the question of how much of our behavior is instinct and how much the product of learning, or choice. I often wonder why a behavior exhibited in both an animal and a human (our mating behavior, going to Florida for the winter, etc.) will, in the animal, be attributed to instinct and in the human to choice. Many of our superstitions have, on closer examination, beneficial effects. We are exhibiting a behavior, since we cannot explain it rationally, by inventing a story to justify it. Susan McCarthy, in her book, *Becoming a Tiger*, examines the behavior of animals and comes to some surprising conclusions (MacCarthy 2004). Many of the behaviors in animals that we attributed to instinct, she concludes, are actually learned or the result of conscious choice. A bird from one area will not attract a mate in another unless he learns the right
song, and animals that migrate must learn the route from their elders. This has some disturbing implications for the way we think about animals; perhaps the line that separates us is not as clear as we have believed. This book, as a body, is my intended way to present the implications of the questions raised by these thoughts so that I can see it in my own way and share.

Another of my books, the book (Figures 7 and 8) is a collection of specimens of belly-button fuzz. I began this collection in 2001, soon after my boyfriend and I moved into our first house. One day as he was getting ready to shower he pulled a small ball of fuzz from his navel and handed it to me. I pretended to be amazed and delighted and put it in a small box for safe-keeping (I really was amazed. I do not, unfortunately, produce this commodity myself!) It became a ritual between us, one of the things that defined our relationship and made it unique. From then on he would always save the small ball of belly-button fuzz for me. I would always be delighted. Some days there would be none, and I would pretend to be bitterly disappointed. In time the collection outgrew the tiny box, and I had to find another way to store it. I solved the dilemma by borrowing the system of an acquaintance who is a coin collector. Each piece is sealed in a small storage bag and affixed to one of a series of folders; one for each year since the collection was begun. I constructed a box, a sort of variation of a clamshell, to hold the collection. It is (as far as I know) the only collection of its kind that exists anywhere. If, like many things in our culture, scarcity increases value, it should be priceless. I suspect that, although the collection is undoubtedly very rare, the demand may not be very high. However, by putting this collection, in all its detail, into a book structure, I have brought into focus
what I sense is the paradox that exists in some things collected and valued so that the questions raised by it can be shared as well.

I am interested in what people value and why. Often there is no logic, no reason or practicality behind it that I can see. The label of a garment does not make it any warmer or more useful, yet one is deemed more desirable than another of equal quality because of specific value assigned to names on that label. I had attempted to address this paradox in an etching from 2007, *Dandelion and Starling*. Both bird and plant are considered vermin by many, although the dandelion is a beautiful flower with an interesting life cycle, and the starling a very intelligent and quiet handsome bird. They are devalued simply because they are so numerous, so common. It is for this same reason that some people go to great lengths to breed “designer” pets, while our animal shelters are full, and millions of dogs and cats are killed or starve in our streets each year.

I am also interested in a related issue: our mania for acquiring things. We are obsessed with collecting: material possessions, wealth and even people (facebook is a prime example; some of my friends have thousands of “friends.”) We respect and even make heroes of those that are good at “collecting.” It is taken for granted that more is better, and forgetting to question why is normal. Acquiring becomes a sort of competition or game, and there is no signpost to signal when it has crossed the fuzzy gray borderline between collecting and hoarding. I have poked fun at my mother’s collections of Depression Glass and carousel horses and my friend’s collection of shoes, and I feel sad for (and a bit smugly superior to) all the poor, rich people obsessed with their possessions.
But I am not immune to the madness myself. I have had more than twenty animals at once, and (to my shame) I have several hundred Beanie Babies in my attic. I will admit that I have a bit more paper than I need to have. To be honest, I feel trapped. It seems impossible to live today without an accumulation of things: clothes for all situations, a separate gadget to prepare every kind of food, a cell phone and a car. I am not (yet) ready to let all my stuff go and walk the earth with just a bowl to beg my dinner, but I am determined to made drastic changes. We all must change because our way of life is not sustainable. We just want everyone else to change first (then maybe we will not have to!)

Enough said. This is a thesis, not a soapbox.

MIXED MEDIA

Collecting Souls

Soul (Figures 9 and 10) is a collection of immortal souls. They are temporarily housed in apothecary jars. When I first conceived of this project, I wanted each to have a container as unique as itself, but on reflection, I decided that as all souls are equal, and the containers should all be the same. I like the jars because they are transparent, and I am fascinated by transparent materials. Glass has always seemed magical to me because it is solid and present, yet it does not always appear to be entirely in our world: fortune tellers scry using transparent mediums, such as glass and water; Alice passed through the Looking Glass to an alternative world (Carroll 1981); people can see through a window pane into the houses and lives of others. But glass separates, creates a portal through which we can not pass, except by violence – or magic.
Most of the souls in my collection have been borrowed from their owners, although I have purchased and even stolen a few (notably ex-husbands and rude people.) I asked the seller/loaner to fill out a label with their name, age, sex, religion and occupation. I record the information along with the date I collected it and will later also record the date and time of its promised release. I have and intend for the collection to rotate, to release souls as I acquire others because I do not want anyone to be without theirs for long. The contract includes a clause that in the event of an emergency, the original owner can recall their soul at will. A friend has agreed to release them if anything happens and I cannot, so that no soul runs the risk of being trapped in its jar for a huge chunk of eternity.

The idea of a soul as a commodity to be bought or traded began when my niece informed me that she had sold my soul on e-bay. I was quiet understandably upset with her because I had not agreed to the transaction, but I was also intrigued. Was there really a market for souls on the internet? I had heard of selling one’s soul to the devil, like Faust, but not to another human being. Who was buying, and why? What on earth could another person do with someone else’s soul? What were the rules of such transactions? How does one package it or ship it? I investigated and found that, although several people had attempted such a transaction, e-bay had banned such sales on the grounds that an intangible object can not be bought or sold.

I began collecting souls because I have had so many unanswered questions about them. They are such strange things. We can not prove that they even exist or that they do not. Although they are invisible, odorless and silent, they are unquestionably our single most important possession. Great care must be taken to keep it in good condition or else
one runs the risk of eternal punishment (or reincarnation as a bug) after death. Some believe that all of our actions, our capacities for good and evil, are rooted in our souls. Our soul is our essence, the core of our being. If this is true, then they are definitely worth serious study.

We must approach knowledge of the soul in a much different way than knowledge of the physical world. The only way to study an intangible thing is through intangible tools, emotion and intuition rather than reason. I can not study my collection of souls in a traditional sense, by examining them under a microscope or observing and documenting their behavior, nor do I feel like it is my duty to punish, reward, improve or change them in any way. I know that each soul must make its own journey and find its own way. I simply want to spend time in their presence and get to know them better. There is so much that I do not know or understand about my fellow humans. The atrocities of which we are capable of inflicting on others are beyond belief. I have been tempted to snatch all the souls bent on evil and hold them away safe in a jar, but I know that I am not qualified to judge anyone’s soul because I do not have any answers to all these questions myself. I collect souls simply to spend time in their presence. Maybe they will, good or evil, teach me, help me to understand what drives them and help me find my own way.

O.K., O.K….this is a thesis, not a spiritual manifesto.

I consider this a work in process and plan to continue to collect and study souls. This exhibit has taught me a lot, not only about souls but about how to better collect and show them. In the gallery the bottles were displayed on a series of shelves mounted on
one side of one of the large square columns in the space. This arrangement had both advantages and drawbacks. I liked the vertically of the display, reaching heavenward from about waist level to close to the top of the space, and the narrow shelves allowed the souls to be displayed in single file. But it limits the number that I can display at one time, and I would like to expand the collection to at least five hundred or so. I also wish that I had documented the conversations that I had while I was collecting. The responses I got from people when I asked them to loan me their soul were very informative, including their reasons for participating or not. I think it would also be interesting to provide a place for people to make comments and share their thoughts instead of just providing the information I requested. Oh, and a table would be nice too; it is a bit awkward to bottle one’s soul and fill out a tag on a tiny shelf.

I plan to further document the project by making a book from the printed residue of the project: the tags I removed form the jars when I released the souls and the pages I used to log my collection of souls as I was collecting them.

Wishing Well

Everything is in motion. The earth turns around the sun, the moon pulls the tides and our galaxy hurls through the universe. We do not know if there is a consciousness behind this design, but for us humans (and our fellow creatures), our every motion must start with our consciousness, our will, with a wish. Since ancient times we have created rituals to ensure that our desires became reality. These rituals usually involve a form of sacrifice. It is believed that the practice of making wishes at wells, while sacrificing a
coin to the water spirits who lived there, began with the Norse legend of King Odin. In exchange for wisdom he sacrificed his eye to Mimir, the god of wisdom, at Mimir’s well at the roots of Yggdrasil, the tree of the world (Gray 2003). There is usually a practical side-effect to superstitious or magical behavior, and the sacrificial coins served another purpose as well; the metal helped keep the water from going bad. The practice of wishing at wells has persisted into our own time, although our water is purified in other ways and the spirits of the water are largely forgotten.

I built my wishing well (Figures 11, 12 and 13) as a part of my work for the thesis exhibition because I wanted to create a mysterious, magical experience for others. Perhaps, for a moment, they could return to the place most of us leave behind in childhood, a place where magic really is possible because we know that it is. While wishes are seldom granted as quickly as we would like or in the form that we expect, the ceremony of formally making a wish brings it closer to the realm of the possible and makes it more concrete. The process forces a participant to consider carefully, prioritize their desires, affirm the one thing that they need or want more than anything else and, water spirits aside, know that this alone has power.

I built my well to look old, a natural grotto where the water spirits would feel at home. The stones are actually made of hypertufa, an anthropic rock made from Portland cement, sand and peat moss, a material that was new for me and that has exciting potential for future projects. I apologized to the water spirits for our neglect of them and asked them to come and consider the wishes of the people who asked for their help. I made 1000 tiny folders, each containing a penny that invited the finder to come and wish at the well. They were very simple, just an invitation to wish and the dates and location of
the well. I felt that this would be more intriguing than a more detailed description. I distributed them where ever I went for the couple of months before the exhibition and saved some to provide at the site of the well. I made a book for participants to record their wish, anonymously of course, if they wanted, and I provided a pen made from a parrot’s feather that I found. Feathers are objects of magic and powerful symbols to many cultures, and finding one is always an occasion of significance. They symbolize truth, and the yellow and blue of colors further symbolize renewal and fertility as well as imagination and unconscious thought (Nozedar 2006).

I had a couple of reports that the spirits were listening and the magic was working. What I was able to make visible and then shared with others seemed to have been successful. I am a little wistful because I too have a wish, but I will have to wait until I find another well where the spirits are at work. Here, I was the architect of the magic, and it would not work for me. I plan to someday build my well in a permanent location. I see it in a lonely, peaceful place surrounded and grown over by nature. It will be a place for thought and contemplation for people and, for the spirits, a permanent home.

O.K. …..maybe a thesis is possibly about creating magic?

*FarmVille*

I would possibility have had my thesis finished some time ago if I had not gotten addicted to *FarmVille*. *FarmVille* is a game on facebook. I first became aware of it when I logged on to facebook to see what my friends were doing and found, every time, what seemed like a hundred posts from *FarmVille*. It was annoying. I did not want to know
that someone had mastered artichokes or found a lost cow; I wanted to know that they were alive and doing o.k. in the real world. I finally decided to see what FarmVille was and the next thing I knew, I had a FarmVille farm and was growing crops like crazy. I climbed eighteen levels in five days, expanded my farm and started collecting animals. I was surprised at myself because I am not a video game person. I have often preached to my daughter and nieces because they spent so much time in front of the television with their Playstation games. Video games, I told them, not only turn children into obese criminals, they are also a terrible waste of time. Then I found myself getting up at four am to harvest my crops. I was addicted, but why?

I have not figured it all out yet, but a large part of the appeal is that FarmVille is the perfect escape for me. Unlike most video games with their fast paced action, competition and violence, FarmVille is tranquil and relaxing. If I could invent my own world, it would be a lot like FarmVille. It is, first of all, a farm, with lots of room for animals and growing things, two of my strongest interests. I grew up on a farm, and it is an environment, and a way of life, that I miss very much. Life on a farm was not the ideal of rural bliss that I would like to remember it as, but in FarmVille it is. Nothing bad ever happens in FarmVille. The worst thing that can happen is that I forget to harvest my crops and find them withered, but even that is not a tragedy, I can always replant them. Nothing ever dies in FarmVille. The animals are never slaughtered, nor do they try to eat each other or get sick or hurt. They do not even need to be fed. There are no hailstorms or floods, blights or epidemics in FarmVille. It is always bright, in primary colors and in pastels. The animals are cute, in a cartoony way, although each, except for its color, is identical to the others of its kind. The plants are always perfect. I can compete with my
neighbors in *FarmVille* to get the most or the rarest items or to master new levels, but it is not required. If I choose, I need not ever see another soul (or *FarmVille* character.)

But at the same time that I am attracted and seduced by this land of virtual perfection, I am also, subtly, repulsed. It is not only because I feel guilty for spending so much time playing a frivolous game or that I am also breaking my own law of never following the herd (I am, according to *Wikipedia*, one of over eighty-two million *FarmVille* farmers, more than one percent of the population of the world,) it is that the bright cheery cuteness of *FarmVille* just feels wrong in a some way I cannot quiet define. The expressions on the animals’ faces seem to suggest that they feel it too. The cow looks sad and the sheep frightened. They know that there is a price to pay for all utopias, even a virtual one.

I started making prints of my *FarmVille* character and the animals to explore my mixed feeling about the game. I have cut them out, and I am collageing them onto large pieces of paper to create *FarmVille* scenes. The flat, cartoon-like images are perfect for serigraphy, so it is also a way to gain experience with a process that I have had little success in making work for me. There are many interesting themes to explore in *FarmVille*. There is the fun and make-believe, but there are other, more serious issues as well. It is, finally, another means of collecting things. The object is to earn as much *Farm Coins* and *Farm Cash* as possible to buy more animals and more things. The more I collect, the more time I spend caring for it. I am also interested in how the animals are idealized and stereotyped. For me, it is the *FarmVille* sheep that represents this best.
Sheep are a symbol of idyllic, pastoral harmony, often portrayed as soft white clouds floating on a peaceful meadow. They are seen as innocent, gentle and pure, but having raised sheep, I know that this is a bit of an exaggeration. They are very nice animals, but, having sheared eight or ten of them on a sweltering day with a pair of scissors, I know that they are not exactly clean, much less pure. In fact, along with the mud (and worse) there are things living in their wool that is better not described here. They are generally peaceful animals, but like all living things, there are exceptions. I had a male sheep, Rosco, who liked nothing better than to see someone with their back carelessly turned. And there is a price, a high one, to be paid for being a herd animal. In the wild, animals herd together for protection. Being a member of the herd has advantages, but in other ways it leaves one more vulnerable. Sheep have been protected and bred for gentleness for centuries and the same characteristics that make them good herd animals leave them defenseless in a situation where they need to think for themselves. I came home one awful day to a nightmarish scene (not in *FarmVille.*) A pack of dogs had chanced along and killed twenty of my sheep. They had, instead of scattering, grouped together in the corner, becoming easy targets for the dogs. The wool looked like snow spread across the field. (I know …this is a thesis… not a collection of sad tales.)

I decided to make one of my prints, using the *FarmVille* sheep as the subject, to examine the concept of a herd animal. Although humans are not as peaceful as sheep (even with Roscoe, the worst result of his behavior was a bruised butt), we exhibit many behaviors that are common to all social animals. We want to belong and be a part of something greater than ourselves. There is nothing wrong with that to an extent; it is even
necessary if we are to survive, but there is a price that must be paid. It becomes necessary to let others shape many of our judgments and opinions; thus the mistakes and deceptions of our leaders become our own. We may suspect that many of our leaders do not have our best interests at heart, and we become as paranoid as the FarmVille sheep look to be.

Because I have combined several, related parts into this one work, I have not decided if Good for Mutton (Figures 14, 15 and 16) is a print or a book. It is a collection of screen printed images and Xerox copies and photographs of the FarmVille sheep, images that I am sure at least one percent of the population of the planet will recognize. I drew some of the images and shamelessly stole others. It is assembled to unfold in two directions, and each manipulation reveals more images of the sheep. Inside the front cover is a business card that reads “Good for Mutton” and a pocket that contains: a cut-out of the sheep, a small print of the sheep, a color photo of it, a small packet containing a string of “sheep dolls,” and a folded piece of copy paper with forty small images (a herd.) Unfolding the copy paper vertically reveals another sheep against a background of a herd of sheep, printed in white, along with another small print. Also, I had made this as a trade print to give to other members of my current class for several reasons. The requirements for this print stated that it should be exactly seven-and-a-half by eleven inches. I saw a loophole (they did not state how thick it could be) and decided to take advantage of it. I also wanted to share a final message with my fellow students. I was appalled to discover that some of them did not know about the Deepwater Horizon disaster and it frightens me think that they have so little interest in the world in which they live. I wanted to share a subtle message in a humorous way: that smart sheep are paranoid, or at least fully awake.
I am not fully awake. Counting all these sheep has made me sleepy. And I know I should finish my thesis, but I have to go to FarmVille and harvest my potatoes before I write my conclusion.

CONCLUSION

The past couple of years have been a time of constant change for me in many ways. My work and how I think about it has changed as well. I know that in the future, it will continue to evolve, but without my crystal ball, I cannot be sure exactly how that may occur. As might be learned from what I have described in the work I have produced, I have discovered that I like to make work that involves others, and I see myself continuing with interactive or collaborative pieces, pieces that can pull people in, get them involved and, for at least a moment, take them to my world, the one I have discovered a need to share; it is a place where reality bends a little, and more than what usually is expected can and will happen if one sees and experiences what I have learned and chosen to share with them. I will also continue to make prints and books that I believe will allow me to show my way of seeing, experiencing and understanding more of what affects my life and that of most human beings. Whatever I do I will remain a student of the universe, exploring the mysteries and magic and dreaming up new possibilities.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX

Images
Figure 1. untitled
Figure 2, *untitled*, detail
Figure 3, •, installation view
Figure 4, •, closed view
Figure 5, *Intuition*
Figure 7, open view

Figure 8, detail
Figure 9, *Soul*, installation view
Figure 10, *Soul*, detail
Figure 11, *Wish*, the well
Figure 12, *Wish*, detail
Figure 13, *Wish*, detail II
Figure 14, *Good for Mutton*

Figure 15, *Good for Mutton*, view II

Figure 16, *Good for Mutton*, view III