TO RIDE A WILD RABBIT

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree Master of Fine Arts in the
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by

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* * * * *

The Ohio State University
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

VITA ................................................................. ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS ............................................... iii
LIST OF PLATES ....................................................... iv
INTRODUCTION ......................................................... 1

SECTIONS PAGE

I. The Big Bang ................................................. 2
II. Rhapsody in Twill ........................................... 3
III. A Major Change ............................................. 4
IV. The Big Bear .................................................. 4
V. Making Light of Winter: The Installation... 7
VI. Making Light of Winter: The Performance... 10
VII. Symbolism .................................................... 15
VIII. Influences .................................................... 17

Conclusion ......................................................... 17
Bibliography ....................................................... 19
# LIST OF PLATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLATE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. A Foreign Land</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. The Chase</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Giant Rabbits</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. The Mountain Moves</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Playing Teeth</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. The Teeth Conquer</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. The Taunters</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. Power Struggle</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX. Foiled</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

"Why are you rabbits jumping so?  
Now please tell why, tell why."
"We jump to see the big round moon  
Up in the sky, the sky."

Japanese Nursery Rhyme\textsuperscript{1}

The focus of my work has gone through dramatic changes. Early in my art education, I became mesmerized by the mechanisms of floor looms which filled the fiber room. To me, the looms were a huge mechanical, art producing installation. The sound of their rhythmical clanking and pounding, the shifting of frames, their shudders and rattles were a visual and percussive symphony of movement. Forty-two Macomber looms were aligned in a six by seven grid, their tempos matched or complemented each other. It was like a great mechanical wheezing, chugging machine. To run such a machine, one's feet played a pattern, one's arms beat a tempo, one's ears were filled with the rhythmical sound of pounding wood and mechanical clanking, one's vision was caught in the dance of shifting frames and one's

tempo was in sync with the clanking of the surrounding looms.

Yet it was the cloth produced by these looms that was of prime consideration. By their very nature, looms impose mathematical systems on the myriad techniques associated with the fiber arts. My natural sense of order flourished in these systems; e.g. dye theories, draw downs, treadling patterns, tie-ups, pattern networks, piecing, flipping and rotating modules, the repetition of interlocking and intersecting fibers, etc. To me, the purpose of all these systems was both to construct a grid and to move motifs through the grid.

Wanting to expand my horizons, I pursued working with handmade paper so I might develop new artistic concerns. I began working modularly and three-dimensionally within a larger grid which I constructed on the wall. While working within these formal concerns, I entered the Ohio State University as a graduate student.

THE BIG BANG

While a graduate student in fibers, I became interested in environmental installations. One of my first installation pieces involved sound, movement and transformation. Using a system of ropes and pulleys, I devised a performance installation in which a spectator sat in a chair while I transformed the situation in
which he was seated. Slowly a large balloon was raised out of a paper sack by means of the ropes and pulleys. Then, bunches of plantains, covered with sharp nails, were released by means of a hair trigger mechanism causing the plantains to careen down the rope on its own pulley and collide forcibly into the balloon with a loud bang directly in front of the spectator. Suspense, surprise and a final percussive explosion was the unfolding sequence of this piece. The use of plantains stemmed from its associations to Frueidian cliches. The balloon was the epitome of vulnerability. Their meeting, resulting in an explosive disintegration of the balloon, was at once both tragic and ludicrous.

RHAPSODY IN TWILL

The performance, Rhapsody in Twill, took place in a gallery. I was the conductor and the orchestra consisted of large handmade paper flaps affixed to the walls. Through a system of cords and pulleys, toggles and peddles, which were likened to the mechanisms of a jack loom, two musicians played "the installation". As the two performers moved their arms and legs in a rhythmic sequence, connecting ropes and pulleys caused paper flaps of large wing-like constructions to beat against the wall. The result was a percussive conversation between the performers and the moving paper sculptures, a kind of dance.
There was a rabbit
Who had no stairs;
He went down a rope
To say his prayers.

Anonymous²

A MAJOR CHANGE

My artistic concerns were strongly influenced by the working principles of Expanded Arts methodology, i.e., the integration of diverse elements in the making of art. It became artistically expedient to switch my major from fibers to Expanded Arts. I drew from my fibers background a rich resource for costumes, masks, construction techniques and, oddly, mechanisms. These interests took new form in the context of performance, installation and video art.

THE BIG BEAR

I had a dream in which I was roller skating through a supermarket. Soon afterwards, I learned that a large supermarket chain, Big Bear, had its original store in a building which had once been a roller rink. Visiting this store was like a dream come true. The building was built as a magnificent roller rink. The huge oval building had varnished wooden plank floors and the expansive ceiling had the openness of a barn

yet supported its massive weight through a complex
architectural network of fine woodworking.

I proposed a video project which was
enthusiastically supported by Big Bear Supermarkets, who
allowed me the use of their store during early business
hours, and by United Skates of America, who contributed
the use of roller skates.

To the opening strains of Johann Strauss' The Blue
Danube, a grocery cart bursts through metal swinging
double doors into the produce department. The cart is
being pushed by myself, propelling and being propelled
by the roller skates on my feet and the wheels of the
grocery cart. While I am building speed in the produce
department, a dozen oranges roll past me in the
opposite direction. The camera scans the installation
of grocery props. The dairy section gradates into the
cold beer. We scan an array of neon beer signs
suspended from the ceiling.

At a relaxed skating speed, I waltz down the
aisles, gliding and guiding the cart in front. Easily
navigating the corners around the aisles, smiling
inwardly, I peruse the patterns of the stocked shelves.
Gracefully I soar down the paper product aisle,
unfurlling a roll of paper towels over my head. The
streaming banner of paper toweling fluttering as it
trails behind as in a Chinese fabric dance.

I skate down a long final aisle, the camera itself following on rumbling wheels. Crashing through another set of metal double doors, I disappear behind them, the camera following me down the long aisle. The camera reaches the doors but does not break through.

In the Big Bear video, the supermarket was used as both a performance installation and a stage. The metal double doors allowed for references to a stage entrance and exit. The viewer, or audience, was allowed only in the store proper, while the produce work area, or backstage, was only accessible to the performer. The trappings of the supermarket, produce, canned goods, paper products and the grocery cart, became props or performance objects.

The wheels on the roller skates, the grocery cart and the camera dolly created a rhythm which was accentuated by the music soundtrack. This rhythm, a rolling and gliding on wheels, was expressed by the performer as an inner joy. The coupling of an ordinary situation, grocery shopping, with an extraordinary stipulation, on roller skates, created a peaceful, pleasant reverie, a daydreaming on wheels.
MAKING LIGHT OF WINTER: THE INSTALLATION

These earlier multi-media experiments, The Big Bang, Rhapsody in Twill, The Big Bear and others not cited here, had direct influences on the development of my final thesis exhibition, a performance/installation titled Making Light of Winter. Costumes, masks, performance props, music, light, dance, puppetry, video and mechanical movement came together within the context of this performance.

The installation was lit with a warm red glow. In this atmosphere, four wooden frames hung successively from the ceiling so that one could look through them all at once. The installation seemed to lay dormant, alive yet at rest, waiting. Each frame had dim interior lighting which evoked an inner life. They lit the stages and illuminated props which would later become active. The frames made reference to miniature stages within a stage. Each one was a microcosm of a scene or action which took place during the performance.

The first frame displayed two wooden rabbits that were viewed through yellow cellophane, illuminated by fifty pink and yellow miniature stage lights. Outside this frame were two giant-sized rabbit constructions which were used as puppets during the performance. The rabbits symbolized both playful innocence and
lascivious promiscuity.

The second frame contained four wooden hammers, one of which could be swung to break a piece of red glass by pulling a cord. A giant black hammer corresponded to the smaller hammers of the frame. As the smaller hammers hit the frame, the giant hammer would strike the walls of the room. The hammers represented destructive frustration.

The third frame had menacing wooden teeth. The teeth could be gnashed together in the frame, but also they were detachable, so that they could leave their frame in order to chase about the room. The teeth stood for gnawing fear.

A mechanically movable mountain occupied the fourth frame. The pumping of a foot pedal raised a lush red curtain from the frame to reveal this mountain. Outside the frame, attached to a red step ladder, was a large mountain shape. The mountains represented great accomplishments, nearly impossible tasks and transcending earth to an other world. The ladder facilitated the ascent.

The performance space also contained a black puppet stage which could be raised or lowered between the frames by means of ropes and a block and tackle. Within this stage, two life-sized baby doll puppets
were suspended. The puppets had menacing rodent-like masks on their faces and spikey little claws instead of fingers and toes. They were at once helpless and threatening.

A white rocking chair sat in one corner of the room. It was a large comfortable chair perfect for rocking the little ones to sleep. Near the chair, three hobby rabbits were mounted in a wall bracket. Akin to hobby horses, these eight foot tall children's toys were ridden by straddling the pole. This was intended to be overtly Freudian.

In the opposite corner, a rear projection screen glowed with red back lighting. During the performance, this screen would be used for shadow puppets, the red glow representing a combination of the tropics, fire and hell.

Between performances, viewers were welcomed to examine the objects and the performance space. The red glow of the room with the interior lighting of the frames and the rear projection screen evoked a seductive, provocative ambience, a sense of mystery.
For the sadness in legitimate humor consists in the fact that honestly and without deceit it reflects in a purely human way upon what it is to be a child.

Soren Kierkegaard

MAKING LIGHT OF WINTER: THE PERFORMANCE

Act I: A Foreign Land (Plate I)

Silhouettes of mysterious figures danced clawingly in a warm red glow. In their primal dance, they menaced each other. Above them, two rabbit heads peered over the life-sized shadow puppet theater. The rabbits, eight foot tall rod puppets, bobbed their heads in mutual understanding as they also joined the primal dance. A sense of mysterious conspiracy pervaded this land of shadows, this land of dark, unknown dangers.

Act II: I'm Not Invited!!

Rodent-like creatures emerged from behind the screen riding the rabbit rod puppets as if they were hobby horses. (Plate II) These creatures were disturbingly part human and part animal. Dressed in stiff red pinafores over black crenolins, their red rodent faces emerged from red babushkas. Two of these

"other worldly" creatures were in pursuit of the first creature, firmly establishing a situation of two against one. It was intended that the audience would relate to the loner. She is the heroine. The other two began to dance together. Feeling left out and wanting to dance, the heroine attempted desperately to cut in but she was shunned by the dancers.

Act III: A Tragedy

Growing angry, she began to smash the room with a giant black hammer. The two dancers reciprocally hammered on the suspended frame housing wooden hammers. The pounding and banging continued until the giant hammer was struck through a large paper partition.

Out from the gaping hole, giant rabbits hopped. (Plate III) Now, they were the ones who were pursued. Angrily, the giant hammer chased them, caught them, and smashed them into the ground.

Upon satisfactorily dealing with the rabbits, a mountain was revealed to the victorious heroine. A red curtain was ceremoniously raised to the ceiling, uncovering the frame containing the mechanically movable mountain. As the two conspirators moved the mountain back and forth, (Plate IV) the heroine ascended an even larger mountain. Up a ladder she
climbed, scaling the sides of the mountain, leaving the earth below. As she reached the summit, she strained upwards, yearningly. She seemed to be reaching for something unattainable, a kind of nirvana.

Slowly down the mountain she descended. Groaning, she pushed the mountain with all her strength but it would not budge. The two other creatures came to her aid. Together, with much effort, they moved the mountain.

Again the heroine ascended the mountain. Again she reached but could not grasp. Again she descended. And once again, in her moment of despair, the others helped her budge the mountain.

Ascending the mountain a third time, her quest was interrupted by a terrible gnarling of teeth. (Plate V) As the vicious wooden teeth gnashed up and down, a rodent played xylophone music on them. Suddenly, the teeth turned on the heroine. Working together, the rodents cornered her. The teeth lashed at her relentlessly until our heroine lay lifeless. (Plate VI) The rodents scurried to tape a red outline on the floor around the body.
Act IV: First Intermission

The heroine woke up, feeling better. She did a little tap dance to show how good she felt. Her tap shoes clacked loudly over her taped silhouette. The reference to waking up implied that the whole situation was in a dream state.

Act V: Who's in Control?

Suddenly finding the rocking chair behind her, the heroine sat and was approached by two baby doll puppets. These infants were very strange and very sad. Like their adult counterparts, the infants were only part human. They shared the same grotesque countenances as their elders but with tiny claws instead of hands and feet, they appeared more primal.

Wanting to comfort the infants, the heroine reached for them in turn. The infants were drawn away from her grasp by the adult rodents who controlled them. (Plate VII) The rodents used the infants to taunt her.

Just as the heroine reached complete despair, she got an idea. She leapt up from the rocking chair and once again ascended the mountain. This time, upon reaching the summit, she straddled the peak and with large marionette controls she commanded the rodents and
infants alike. (Plate VIII) In this scene, a hierarchy of control was established. Those who had once been seen to have power were mere puppets to a higher scheme.

Act VI: Second Intermission

As the heroine entertained the audience with a short tap dance, the other characters prepared the set for the next act.

Act VII: Wake Up, Sleepyheads!

The infants were suspended inside an open black puppet stage. Slowly, the stage was raised by means of ropes and a block and tackle. The heroine climbed up the mountain and reached into the stage to touch the infants. (Plate IX) They shrieked at her. She recoiled. Again and again she tried. Never was she allowed to hold them. Even though they had transcended earth, their pathetic relationship had not changed. This was a sad ending.

Act VIII: Exit, Stage Left

A tap dancing dual in which the performers tried to out-tap each other provided a comical exit.

The End
SYMBOLISM

Juxtapositioning of a set of symbols created an interactive dialogue and formed a narrative. The set of symbols which I used in my thesis exhibition represented the Child, the Adult and the Parent as defined by Transactional Analysis\textsuperscript{4} and elements which represented good and evil. I also borrowed symbols from dreams, my own dreams and cliched dream symbols from Freud's \textit{The Interpretation of Dreams}\textsuperscript{5}.

The hobby rabbits represented the Child. They were based on a child's toy, the hobby horse. Rabbits are seen as both innocent and promiscuous. The riding of these exaggerated toys by the female characters was overtly Freudian.

The puppet infants also represented the Child. They consisted of love worn dolls who were cast in a garbage heap. They were survivors, however, in that they had developed claws and had become part animal themselves. They were rodent-like and like rodents,


their family lineage consisted of both rabbits and rats. Used as puppets, these infants represented the Child in the performers.

The three characters who activated the relationships between the personified props and themselves were women who all possessed a strong, creative Child. They wore the pinafores of girlhood and the masks and claws of their doll counterparts. They were the tap dancers, the "Ratty-tat-tappers", who were not "dancers". The amateur status of their hoofing was appropriate to their Child/Adult/Parent conflict.

References to the proscenium stage were exhibited on different scales. Within the life-sized performance area, or stage, were miniature stages. These stages contained scenes and were arenas for the narrative action on different levels.

Masks, costumes and dance were borrowed from traditional theater. An action was "staged" using props. The resulting narrative concerned the interaction of different scales and differing psycho-social positionings within a dream context.
The movements in the performance were primal and conveyed an understated humor due to their directness. As the tap dancing was appropriate due to its amateurish awkwardness, so were the simple direct tie-ups of the framed mechanisms likened to a child's view of our technocratic society.

INFLUENCES

Artist's who have been an influence on me include Oskar Schlemmer for his Bauhaus performances, Malevich for his costumes, David Hockney and Joseph Cornell for stage design and Yves Tinguely for moving props.

I have also been greatly influenced by the puppets of Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Victorian Children's Theater, Balinese/Chinese shadow puppets, rod puppets from the Far East, Elizabethan glove puppets, marionettes and proscenium stages from Italy and the Banraku puppet theater of Japan.

CONCLUSION

By employing an array of media, I have attempted to recreate an experience which was rooted in my subconscious. By responding intuitively to elements from my dreams, my intention has been to develop a vehicle in which to express conflicting ideals. Using symbolism in a narrative situation allowed me to
juxtapose and layer elements.

My work has changed and evolved in the past two years. Rather than narrowing my personal perception of art, my experience has been that, by openly accepting a wide variety of interpretations, a layering of ideas can be achieved.

Though my dreams are from my own subconscious, I believe the experiences to be universal. By working intuitively with the images, their own symbolic strengths come to the surface. Not until it is completed can I begin to interpret what I have done.
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PLATE I: A FOREIGN LAND
Rehearsal Photograph
PLATE III: GIANT RABBITS
Rehearsal Photograph
PLATE IV: THE MOUNTAIN MOVES
Rehearsal Photograph
PLATE VI: THE TEETH CONQUER
Rehearsal Photograph
PLATE VIII: POWER STRUGGLE
Rehearsal Photograph
PLATE IX: FOILED
Rehearsal Photograph