THE HANDLE BELONGS

TO US

A Thesis

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the Degree Master of Fine Arts

by

Melinda Coia, Bachelor of Art Education

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Approved by

Advisor

Department of Fine Arts
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My work expresses a duality in my life between divine and human natures. I characterize human nature as imperfect, lacking full knowledge and possessing conflicting desires, but also frequently motivated by the highest ideals. I characterize divine nature as mysterious, and in scope I only partially experience. At times, my experience of both natures is integrated into one awareness. At times I feel separate from the Divine. As my understanding of either divine or human natures change, my art work also changes. Through trying to express this relationship in visual form, I am able to reflect on my internal experience.

The development of my work is directly related to my religious beliefs. My religion is the way I maintain a relationship with the Divine. In 1977 I became a Christian. For several years I had a naive conception of God as a protector and benefactor of man. This conception worked fine until I moved to Taiwan in 1981. I was unhappy, and my religion was no refuge. I saw instances of man's inhumanity and seemingly irresolvable conflict. My religion could not supply the answers to such problems, the awareness of which led me to question my conception of God and my relationship with Him. When I first came to realize that God was not what I had initially conceived Him to be, I no longer trusted the canon of the Christian Church. In order to understand myself and God, I needed to understand how I
experienced God's presence outside of established religion. My change in attitude demanded a more experientially true conception of God. My art has been an indispensable part of it's formation.

The first pieces I completed upon returning from Taiwan consisted of black and white painted shapes (see Plate #1). I used blackness and shape to convey the way I felt about God. Black paint reminded me of the infinite depth of space, formless and incomprehensible. The contour of the shapes reminded me of glyphs from a lost culture, with residues of their original message held in their forms. To underscore this image of God, I assembled the pieces in my living room with the following quote from Job 33:14-16 written along the top of the walls: "For God speaks in one way and in two, though man does not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls upon men, then he opens the ears of men...." For me, each shape was a "vision in the night," mysterious and bearing an indecipherable message. These pieces were the first step in trying to formulate a personal conception of God.

The following year, I felt I needed to express a more concrete manifestation of God's presence in my life. God seemed most evident to me in nature. The magic of growth, the power of a cyclone or waterfall; this energy is inexplicable and flows like the blood of God. Images such
as trees, ripples which could be air or water currents, and spirals were symbolized in the black and white shapes of my work. The scale of the shapes began to increase with this more dynamic idea. As in my first installation, I was anticipating arranging the shapes on a wall. Frustrated with the lack of impact of the arrangement, I began to think of other ways to involve the walls. Borofsky's wall paintings suggested a solution. By painting the imagery on the walls (see Plate #2), I could have greater control over the negative shapes and further increase the scale. I made four large wall paintings during my first year of graduate school. These were satisfying in the energy and power they evoked, but frustrating because they took a long time to do. Feeling the need to move through ideas more quickly, I decided to return to a photography project that I had begun at the same time as the wall paintings.

For some time I had represented myself in my art through the gesture of a female silhouette. Curious as to the expressive potential of the silhouette, I decided to photograph my shadow. I had hoped that by making a shadow, thus feeling the gesture of the silhouette, I could better discover and control its expression. The resulting photographs did not carry the power I had hoped for. They were melodramatic and cliche', reminiscent of old movie posters or the silhouetted figures in James Bond movies.
All of my personal characteristics were eliminated in the photographs, leaving impersonal shapes. In order to make them more expressive and to convey a sense of personality, I painted the mats and embellished their surfaces with tawdry materials.

My approach to materials was affected by the work of Ree Morton. In 1979, I saw a retrospective of her work. Immediately after seeing the show, my work became playful and colorful. Her ideas were deep and complex, further presentation is refreshingly straightforward, perhaps even naive. She showed me that I could approach any idea, no matter how personal or ambiguous, and express it visually. The black and white work done prior to this series required me to suspend my playful and colorful visual vocabulary. In this series of photographs, playful and colorful qualities began to reappear.

One of the photographs, On the Street, (see Plate 43), is in response to the preconception of American women held by many Chinese men. In general, as an American woman, I was treated with both awe and disdain. I was perceived to be sexually promiscuous and desirable, almost as a sex goddess. At the same time, I was perceived to be uncivilized. Much of these ideas seem to be perpetuated by American movies and by the ignorance of the differences between Chinese and American culture. On the Street depicts
a nude female silhouette in a gesture of angst. An image of a Chinese man pointing to the figure is superimposed on top of the silhouette. His lips are over the place where the face of the female would have been. Fur is placed on top of the glass to indicate pubic hair. An artificial cherry hangs over the mat. The way the imagery is juxtaposed - finger to silhouette, and lips to face - seem to speak of a cold eroticism. The finger does not touch, it points. The lips do not meet, they take the place of the face. The female silhouette has no personal characteristics, but seems dominated by the man's preconceptions.

Although this prejudice hurt and angered me, I felt it important to convey my emotions with humor. On first impression, there is a delightful quality in the metallic surfaces of the mat. The cherry's incongruous presence on top of the picture plane seems playful. It is only upon a very careful study that the female silhouette can be discerned and the clues to the photograph's personal significance can be deciphered. In this case, humor counter-balanced my anger.

The way I have analyzed this image gives the impression that my decisions are made solely for the purpose of expressing emotions and thoughts. Intertwined into my decisions are also considerations of form. My formal aesthetic is characterized by elegance and discordance. I
enjoy the elegance of graceful lines and delicate detail as well as the abrasiveness of metallic surfaces and artificial materials. I am attracted to stability and order, often using symmetrical forms and carefully balancing color and texture. I dislike my work that is too comfortable in design, often seeking ways to upset the order.

The series of photographs was significant to me in two ways. Many of the photographs related to personal experiences which occurred in Taiwan. They provided a way to express thoughts and emotions which I had not been able to express before. They were therapeutic, and I am grateful for the therapy. The second way they were significant, was that they were colorful and playful. Tawdry materials such as tinsel, plastic fruit and flowers, rhinestones and beads effected the photographs with a sense of whimsy. Thus the series was transitional - out of the memory of Taiwan and into a more lighthearted approach to making art.

In studying the silhouette, I changed my focus from the Divine to myself. Upon completion of the photographs, I gradually came to involve both divine and human natures in works of art. The expression of human nature, personality and mood, developed from the use of materials and colors in the series of photographs. I chose artificial materials, such as plastic flowers, because they reminded me of human qualities. They seemed to characterize human failure and
superficiality in their awkwardness, yet they seemed to characterize the human desire for beauty as well. They were also man made as opposed to natural objects. The presentation of the Divine took the form of wood. In choosing this material, I drew upon the motif of trees as a symbol for divine energy as developed in the wall paintings and earlier black and white shapes. In the beginning of this study, the relationship between the Divine and human was one among many issues in my work. As the work developed, that relationship became of central importance.

The first pieces done after the photographs were highly decorated frames with mats. They developed out of the work done exploring materials and colors which seemed to convey human qualities in the mats of the photographs. By eliminating the photograph, I hoped to affect one's perception while viewing through the aperture of the frame. I wanted the mood and personality associated with the materials and colors of the mat to change one's perception of the segment of the environment seen through the frame. These pieces were intended to express a duality between art and non-art objects; the art object being the mat and frame, and the non-art object being the inclusion of a segment of the environment. Part of the problem with the frames was that the eye could not simultaneously focus on both the frame and what was seen through it. The viewing experience
was in two parts. Thus, the frame and the objects seen through the frame tended to effect perception intellectually rather than visually. Also, there was no reason to look for a relationship because the frame was not visually related enough to the objects seen through the frame.

To solve these problems, I constructed hanging devices integrated with the object being viewed through the frame (see Plate #4). I chose wood to counter the artifice of the frame. Unconsciously, I had referred back to the personal symbol of divine energy developed in the wall paintings. At this point, the decision to use wood was intuitive, but later the sacred element of the duality would take the shape of wood. These pieces were interesting, but using a hanging device off the wall prohibited people who were not my height from viewing the object through the frame.

I began looking for a structure which would eliminate this problem. I decided to construct the object behind the frame before making the frame. What resulted were several small fantasy environments. Each fantasy environment contained a tree or stick figure and a frame. The focus was the tree, usually decorated with tacky materials. The frame was fairly incidental to the impact of the work. For example, in one piece the frame was hanging behind the tree (see Plate #5), and in another, a small frame was placed in front. Although the frame was not a major issue in these
environments, I included it as a motif because I hoped that in later pieces it would become more important.

Part of the reason I included the frame in these pieces was because the frame, like a pedestal, separates art from the rest of our environment. In this way, the frame can humorously make art out of anything (see Plate #6, Nancy cartoon). By pointing out objects, the frame can elevate the commonplace. Also, I was reluctant to give up two dimensional work. In a queer way, the frame made three dimensional work permissible to me. Finally, I felt somewhat self conscious about making art, and by including a frame in the work, I felt more honest about my conjuring.

I was dissatisfied with these small environments because they seemed tangential to my needs. This dissatisfaction led me to re-evaluate my ideas. I came to realize that my relationship to what I see as a divine presence in life, or God, is of central importance to myself and my work.

Part of this realization was due to reflecting on Moundbuilders Country Club Golf Course. For a long time I sensed it was a profound place. It oddly seemed to express my relationship with God in a way that was true to my life. Moundbuilders Country Club Golf Course is a golf course built over a system of Native American mounds. I associate a sacred presence with the mounds because of their presumed religious purpose. I associate a human presence with the
golf course because of its recreational purpose. These two qualities, the sacred and human, are juxtaposed in a way that expresses my perception of religion. Each quality affects the experience of the other. Because the mounds are associated with the golf course, the sacred becomes a part of secular life. I do not feel that religion is separate from life. Because the golf course is experienced with the mounds, I became sensitive to the golf course as a sacred place. Experiencing life as sacred is one of my interests. I found Moundbuilders Country Club Golf Course strangely humorous. It seems like such an unlikely spot to find the meaning of my life.

Applying what I learned from Moundbuilders Country Club Golf Course to my work meant that I needed to visually juxtapose forms which represented sacred and human qualities. The juxtaposition should serve to make the human qualities appear holy and the sacred qualities to appear worldly. Art, as represented by the frame, was the means to this expression.

My work changed after this realization. I tried to combine materials which were strong images of nature and artifice in a way that included a frame. I found a wooden frame whose surface was treated in an artificial manner. The wood had been pressed into unnatural ripples designed to simulate wood grain. The frame had once been painted gold,
but most of the paint was chipped off. It had the dual role of operating as a frame and an object of artifice. A log represented the natural element (see Plate #7). It was untouched except for a spiral drawn lightly on the surface. By drawing the spiral, I was referring back to the energy of nature that I tried to express in the wall paintings. This piece was significant in that it tied together my thoughts in a direct way. For me, the log was made into an art object by being framed, and the organic qualities of the log were made apparent by contrast to the artificial qualities of the frame.

Next, I focused on the picture plane as a doorway between divine and human elements. I took a piece of gauze and stretched it across a frame. Then, I placed a branch partially through and partially around the frame (see Plate #8). The gauze made an issue of the picture plane while filtering the view of the branch behind it. By doing this, this piece expressed my attitude toward art and God. The screened branch appeared mysterious, as is my awareness of God. Art, as represented in the picture plane and frame, was the tool for this expression. The framed branch was the beginning of several pieces where the picture plane became a point of change. In one piece, the artificial element, as represented in a plastic flower, was in front of the picture plane seeming to grow out of the wood behind it. In several
pieces, the picture plane was the axis of symmetry. In this case, the picture plane gave the initial impression of a mirror (see Plate #9).

In some of these pieces my work seemed to resemble qualities of primitive fetishes. The proportion of wood in my work has increased greatly since making the small environments. In addition, I began to include animal references such as fur and feathers. The symmetry was reminiscent of religious icons. To me, these ritualistic qualities juxtaposed against the artifice of rhinestones and plastic leaves, gave the sense of very strange fetishes.

At this time, I began to study Chashitsu architecture. Chashitsu is the name of Japanese ceremonial tea houses. Their architectural style exalts the relationship of home with nature. The Japanese "...do not regard Nature as opposed to human beings, but want to take it into their lives in order to co-exist with it and to exist within it."¹ The result, Chashitsu, is "...built so as to integrate itself with nature: a timber having its bark purposely left on is often used, for example, as a pillar; bamboo stalks are entwined with vines, for example, for a fence...."²

² Ibid.
Outside the house are gardens called "roji" meaning "dewed ground." The name is from the words of a "...Buddhist sutra: 'One stands on the white-dewed ground, after leaving this world of flaming passions'."³ The gardens are carefully designed to prepare the visitor for the tea ceremony.

The elements of Chashitsu architecture are similar to the ones in my work. I am trying to represent human and divine qualities by using man made and natural materials. Chashitsu presents a harmonious meeting of man and nature through the treatment of natural materials in a man made environment. Often, I also present a harmonious meeting of man and nature, but my understanding requires an expression of more extreme differences between man made and natural elements. Whereas the roji gardens invite one to leave behind the flaming passions of the world, I invite one to bring them along. I am cautious of any philosophy which does not include everyday life. If a believer must censor his or her experience in order to maintain faith, then I suspect the validity of that faith. In order to be true to my understanding of life, I must include the awkwardness of man and the brutality of nature along with their grace and harmony.

My most recent works were inspired by this Turkish saying: "When the ax came into the forest, a tree said, 'The handle belongs to us'." I interpreted this saying to mean that there is a similar quality in both the attacker and the one being attacked. This saying expressed what I feel is a similar quality in the frame and natural and artificial elements in my work. The appearance of these last pieces is integrated as the frame becomes the bridge connecting wood which has been altered, and wood which has been left in its natural state. In this piece (see Plate #10), the top of the wooden frame has been disguised by a painting of wood grain. The painting exaggerates the colors of wood grain, almost in a mockery of its actual appearance. The unpainted wood, rough and weathered, is on the opposite side of the frame. By using wood in all of the elements of the piece, the frame and its artificial and natural treatments, I am pointing to the similarities among the elements. These works are more similar to the harmony of Chashitsu architecture than my previous work. I see future work as ground to maintain this harmony, but increase the identity of the wood as either raw or manipulated.

By including the frame in the form of the piece rather than using it as a pointing device, I am becoming less concerned with the issue of art. I am beginning to take for granted that I am making art, and the frame is becoming less symbolically important.
There are many contemporary artists I feel akin to, although I cannot pinpoint influences. I am attracted to the intensity of Cindy Sherman's self-portraits, Jedd Garet's surreal environments, Joan Thorn's highly stylized Abstract Expressionism and Peter Alexander's black velvet paintings. I also like Thomas Lanigan-Schmit's spontaneous and decorative approach to art making. The work of these artists is passionate, yet it seems to smile at itself.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


PLATE #1
INSTALLATION VIEW OF BLACK AND WHITE SHAPES
PLATE #3
ON THE STREET
PLATE #4

NIGHT OASIS
PLATE #5

DAY Oasis
PLATE #6

NANCY CARTOON

WE USED TO HAVE A BARE SPOT ON OUR WALL---

--BUT I COVERED IT WITH A MODERN ART PAINTING

GREAT IDEA-- WHAT'S THE PAINTING CALLED?

"CRACKED PLASTER"

[Cartoon panels with speech bubbles]
PLATE #7

UNTITLED
PLATE #8

FRAMED PLANE
PLATE #9

DUET
PLATE #10

WHEN THE AX CAME INTO THE FOREST