THE IDEA AS IMAGE

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by

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To my parents
Aunita and Ted
and
To my husband
Rod
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FIELDS OF STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

My primary area of specialization is painting, with an emphasis on mixed media. My work revolves around the exploration of the individual as a social construction, and the way constructed gender roles are expressed and validated through gender specific mediated images and objects. Formally my work continues in the use of the elements most basic to my interest in painting; luminous atmosphere, mysterious complicity, and the use of images and the space they occupy, in creating a dialogue which is familiar, yet uncomfortably intimate, the psychological edge of a moment.

I have been investigating issues of gender, power, and their interrelationship to both myself and society. I make use of metaphorical and everyday imagery that is both intensely personal and universal. Using the language and imagery of everyday life, I reconstruct and assemble the elements in an attempt to articulate the tension between the emotional and intellectual aspects of socially, culturally, and politically constructed gender roles.

My work involves the use of transparencies and multiple layers, both in its process and content. My painting process consists of the layering of materials, mediums, and methods. This involves a combination of watercolor and oil glazes on paper and wood, with the addition of collage. My recent work has also incorporated transparent papers and plastics. The choice of materials serve as integral visual elements, while also acting as symbol and metaphor. In the juxtaposition of recognizable imagery with formal elements which reinforce the 2-dimensional surface, dualities are exposed that I hope question both the formal aesthetics of the painting and the way visual language is used to construct content.
THE IDEA AS IMAGE

Art is made of ideas. My ideas begin with the visual assessment of the images around me that construct and instruct my environment, and how these images are used in our society. My current work has evolved from an earlier focus on photo-realistic and Trompe L'oeil imagery which tended to emphasize form over content, to the use of images to develop a dialogue, or narrative through their relationship to one another and the viewer. I am interested in the power of the image and the way images are used to communicate ideas. Particularly, how visual language is constructed and used to reinforce cultural standards through print and television.

My ideas begin with images culled from a variety of sources. I fill folders with images cut from magazines, advertisements, books, and newspapers. Many of these images are advertisements for products which target female consumers, and offer the promise of better lives and/or a more attractive appearance. I also work from the actual objects and from photographs that I take of objects and environments. While the starting point for my paintings is the appropriated image, and how I re-present that image to help create a different and/or alternative reading, the materials and media used in the painting process have become as important to the final visual interpretation as the representation of images.

When I began the program at The Ohio State University my primary painting medium was watercolor on paper. During my first year in the program I became dissatisfied with the limitations of watercolor and began to experiment with, and include a variety of other methods, media, and materials. Feminine Adaptor (Plate I) was the first painting to include mixed media. My experimentation in this painting began a new process, both in terms of materials and imagery. This new process allowed me to have more freedom during the painting and creative process. I needed a process that promoted
experimentation with the juxtaposition of, and spatial relationships between, images.

This painting began with the relationship between two central images, the red vessel (urinal), and the feminine adaptor. The adaptor inserts into the urinal to make it convenient for a woman to use. I was interested in the connections between the shapes, the way they fit together, and the visual and physical reference to both genders. By incorporating mixed media, I could paint the images with watercolor on paper, cut them out, and arrange them. This allowed me the freedom to move the images, playing with the space around and between them. I placed the image of the urinal inside another cocoon/vessel shape making it less accessible to the connecting adaptor while attempting to create distance, and tension in their relationship. I began to incorporate other collaged materials to reinforce the surface qualities, juxtaposing the flat surface of the painting with the illusion of a 3-dimensional image and space.

While many of the elements are based on conceptual ideas, intuition is also an important part of my creative process. While I begin with an initial premise, I allow for many of the decisions about the elements of form to come through in the painting process. Materials are added and removed. Paint and color are built up with layers of glazes. Often paint is applied, only to be wiped off leaving a ghostly residue. I refrain from using white paint to produce the effect of light. Instead, I try to pull a luminous, reflective light through the layers of glazes from the white primed surface of the painting. My entire process is one of layering. Starting very lightly I slowly add more color, paint, images, light and depth to the surface.

Through the development of the painting Feminine Adaptor, I became aware of the importance of the atmosphere and space in which the images reside. I thought these two elements greatly affected the way the images related to one another, while influencing the overall psychological and emotional tone that was produced. I became more focused on the use of light to create a visceral space, and to invoke a mood. This pushed me to investigate more thoroughly the work of various artists who worked within the still life genre.

I examined the work of Spanish artists Diego Velazquez and Francisco Zurbaran. The study of their paintings reinforced my interest in the still life, while sparking an interest in
the use of the figure. I became particularly intrigued with the notion that images could represent aspects of a culture, and visually reproduce the gender roles in their historical specificity. Rando has described gender as “...the relationship in which individuals come to know themselves as men and women” (51). The idea that simple everyday still life objects could act as indicators of the cultural standards for class, race and gender (a still life time capsule) gave me a new way to perceive the objects within my field of experience.

During the summer of my first year in the graduate painting program I was given the wonderful opportunity to travel to Spain. This opportunity became available through a travel grant offered by the department to first year students. I was able to further study the style and painting process of Velazquez and Zurbaran. My travels also allowed me to become more knowledgeable in the historical, visual and religious aspects and practices of Spain. I was amazed at the power that religion, particularly Catholicism had over their paintings. Zurbaran’s paintings of saints and virgin martyrs expanded my interest in the figure to include personal and historical representations. I became enthralled with his portrayal of the virgin martyrs, and the implications that this type of representation of women had on current gender roles.

Upon my return from Spain I decided to rework a painting I had completed of a female figure, but had become dissatisfied with. It Only Hurts When I Laugh. (Plate II) was based on a photograph of myself after an appendix operation. It began as a personal exploration into feelings of powerlessness. While the idea originated with my personal hospital experience, it soon expanded to include a universal reflection on the feelings of being trapped within gender roles. The figure started to acquire the psychological role of a virgin martyr. This role mirrored the physical abuse and degradation of women in our society and their traditional role of passivity and acceptance. I placed the figure in a distorted, claustrophobic space to emphasize her position. The images that reside in the space with her are objects of domesticity, a vacuum cleaner cord and a seam ripper. The objects are dualistic and dialectic in their roles, simultaneously referring to domestic chores, and to potentially harmful instruments. The figure and seam ripper were painted with watercolor on paper then collaged onto the wood surface of the painting. The
collaged elements were added to disrupt the smooth aesthetics and to confuse the spatial illusions.

The still life and the figure have a long tradition in art history. I wanted to use aspects of that tradition to construct an alternative to that tradition by depicting areas of our culture not usually represented. Espousal (Plate III) is just such an attempt to claim those formal art historical traditions for the purpose of re-evaluating the power of representation, and examine how stereotyping roles are constructed through visual symbols. Struggles over meaning reside in the symbolic and:

feminist theory has provided us with the insight that gender is both a structural component of society and a way of knowing. Gender, sexuality, the human body, and individuals' experience of them are given meaning by the symbolic and cannot in any way be understood as natural, unmediated by culture (Rando 48).

I chose to combine the traditional elements of the still life and figure. The still life objects are placed on a table top. The objects portrayed are those used in everyday life, common and mundane. I have attempted to undermine the traditional still life genre by including an object rarely, if ever depicted in a still life. A diaphragm sits on a book on the table. It is an object relegated to the world of women, put in a drawer, or on a shelf in the bathroom. It is placed in that gray area of the forbidden and sexual. I was playing with objects that referred to both genders and the way their proximity to one another on the table set up a dialogue between them. I wanted them to act as symbols, that when read together, would express the intimate area in a relationship that is often off limits. The image of a diaphragm automatically sets the tone for sexual innuendo. I decided to have the image relate to a male figure instead of the traditional female nude used to represent sensuality/sexuality.

Moments of sexual intimacy have historically and traditionally been the preserve of the male viewpoint, the male gaze. I wanted to represent an alternative type of intimacy focused on the male's role in a relationship under the glance of his partner. Representing only a part of the figure, was intended to universalize, not objectify. By looking down on the man's legs, feet and bed, the viewer is placed within the intimacy of the scene, trying to understand their own physical perspective, and their intimate relationship to the figure.
Sometimes a painting style grows out of a reaction to earlier work. In my former paintings, I employed dark, somber colors to create the mood. I felt the need to expand my palette, to produce different types of light and atmospheres. In *Espousal*, I worked to invoke a bright, intense light that flooded the scene, partially covering and obscuring the detail of the images. The illusion of light creates a palpable atmosphere, and solidifies the surrounding space. I distorted the spatial relationship between the table, the floor, and the bed, in an attempt to disengage the traditional formal qualities of the genre. Along with the element of collage, I allowed the unprimed wood surface of the painting to represent the floor, again trying to disrupt the illusion of depth and reinforce the surface. Unfortunately, these disrupting elements were so well incorporated into the painting, they failed to forcefully assert themselves. While I was very satisfied with the solution of this painting, I thought I should expand my exploration of layers of materials and elemental juxtapositions.

*We Only Did What We Knew, We Only Knew What We Did* (Plate IV) started as another reaction to former paintings. I needed to allow myself the freedom to play with my process, I had to move away from the seriousness of previous work. Instead of beginning with a completely coalesced idea, I allowed my attraction to the shape of an object, a vacuum cleaner, to initiate the painting process. I realized that it did, or could represent concepts relevant to gender specificity, but it was the initial visual impact, and sexual attributes of the object that sparked my interest. I was also intrigued by the humorous and animated qualities inherent in the object.

This painting centers on the relationship between the vacuum cleaner hose with attachment, and the bulbous, pink douche. The image of the douche can function as more than just the object it represents. The shape, volume, and color are visual elements that also refer to, or symbolize aspects of gender. The images reflect their use by a specific gender acting in defined roles constructed through social standards. While the images operate as symbols of domesticity, there also exists a suggestion of sexual tension between them. The humorous nature of these images lies in their representations outside their usual domain. They become animated symbols replete with sexual innuendo and energy.
I eliminated most of the architectural space to focus more attention on the dialogue between the images. I incorporated the collaged element of photocopies to produce the flat shape of the tiled floor. A transparent layer of vellum was added to exaggerate the shape, and forward thrust of the vacuum attachment, while acting as an ghost impression or shadow. The wood surface of the painting is cut in half to dislocate the space the objects reside in. The two halves become visually reconnected with the overlap of the tile floor, and the penetration of the vacuum cleaner hose into the upper space. The sides of the painting are shaped to emphasize movement, and to help create the illusion of space moving towards us at the bottom, and receding from us, towards the image of the douche at the top of the painting.

Working from objects serves to construct an automatic objectivity that keeps the content and/or narrative from becoming too sensational or dramatic. This objectivity allows the viewer the distance necessary for multiple interpretations/ readings. This is why I fluctuate between the representation of only objects, to the inclusion of the figure. In the representation of the figure lies the inherent danger of over dramatization, but identification with the figure creates a personal involvement that is lacking in the object alone.

Self Portrait as St. Agatha (Plate V) refers to religious and art historical images related to the depiction of women, as a way to comment on modern traditions. I attempt to explore where in history a particular image becomes accepted as a dominant image, or imagery, such as virgin martyrs, and the conditions out of which they diverge from their original sources. I am also concerned with how these images are, in turn reappropriated into negative symbols such as the role relegated to women in patriarchal Christianity. I combine the reference to historical images of women, with current representations of women within stereotyped roles. By appropriating these images, I hope to bring into question the power that images have to reinforce or construct roles. I try to reconstruct the image to invest it with alternative, if not oppositional meanings that contest dominant representations.

The figure in this painting is based on a self-portrait. The majority of the figure is covered with a transparent vellum oval. Drawn on top of the breasts are the directional
indicators for a self-administered breast examination for possible cancerous lumps. The vellum oval and encircled focus on the breast area refer to the symbol for St. Agatha. The symbol of her saintly status consists of her cut off breasts placed on a silver tray. This is the symbol of the violent acts perpetrated against her which gave her the status of a virgin martyr. Though she was raped and mutilated, she was saved by God, remained a virgin, and was made a Saint.

The jello mold above the figure acts as a halo, but serves as a modern representation and reminder of the domestic functions of women within existing social relations. While all the elements serve as metaphor and symbol, they are also important as formal elements. The shape of the jello mold echoes the shape of the breasts, which in turn is reinforced by the vellum oval. The vellum creates a layer of transparency that negates, or covers the figure beneath it, while reasserting the surface of the painting. The paper is ripped in half separating the modern and the historical references, but they are reconnected and rearticulated through the domestic art of sewing.
CONCLUSION

My current work, exemplified by Self Portrait as St. Agatha is intended to invite the viewer to engage in, and to critically explore existing social relations. However, it is not my intention to close off meaning, or to guide the viewer through the various symbols. On the contrary, my objective is to present works that are open to a multiplicity of readings and interpretations. This is precisely where the difficulty of writing about one’s own work enters the fold. While reflecting upon one’s own work can be empowering, it is also can prove to be an uncomfortable task and my own interpretations should not be misconstrued as an attempt to close off meaning, nor read as the dominant source of a single, authentic meaning from the artist. Such a reading would necessarily contradict my own objectives. Finally, I am continually striving to maintain a balance and unity between form and content that is as often informed through the intuitive painting process, as it is through my own conscious ideas.
PLATE I
FEMININE ADAPTOR
PLATE II
IT ONLY HURTS WHEN I LAUGH
PLATE III
ESPOUSAL
PLATE IV
WE ONLY DID WHAT WE KNEW, WE ONLY KNEW WHAT WE DID
PLATE V

SELF PORTRAIT AS ST. AGATHA
WORKS CITED

BIBLIOGRAPHY