AN AESTHETIC EXPLORATION
OF MY MATERNAL EXPERIENCES

A Thesis

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by
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AN AESTHETIC EXPLORATION OF MY MATERNAL EXPERIENCES

I go to the studio and make art because I have things to say and often no one to say them to. I have a need to communicate feelings about the life I lead -- about my experiences. Even having good friends to talk with isn't enough communication. I need to materialize these feelings and experiences to see them separate from myself. When they are separate from me I can look at them again and again trying to understand them. I can try to make others understand them and experience them the way I have. I need to work in the studio daily to make myself feel whole. It is a part of my clockwork that needs to be creating all the time. Making art allows me to sleep every night at peace with myself and with the people around me.

The newest work that I have made is about thoughts, feelings and experiences that I have had since I've been pregnant and my son was born. The whole event was a very traumatic and unforgettable one. Since my work has always been a kind of therapy for me, going back to the studio again was a very important stage. After my son was born, making art became a real purging process. Being back in the studio was like going to my private place and screaming -- trying to expel all the thoughts, fears, anxieties that had built up over a year. A year filled with lifelong experiences.

In the past my work had a dark side to it. The darkness was not the focus, but still present. For ten years as a printmaker I worked in color and black and white. In both, the prints always had a quality of high contrast, harsh lighting. No matter what
idea I had been working with, when a body of work was completed, I would discover
some unconscious details that suggested negative ideas or feelings. I worked figuratively
for a long time and these figures were cropped photos showing torsos only. Heads,
arms, legs were cut off. This cropping and dramatic lighting seemed subdued by the
abstraction of the photo image. My use of vibrating color and additions of fabric
patternning created a focus on the abstracted picture rather than the harshly treated
body.

As I became more aware of these underlying features I began to feel that they
should be allowed to emerge. I started doing prints in black and white to turn my focus
toward the dramatic qualities of the image, and away from the seductive quality of color.
As a result the images became more organic and free form, instead of more definitive.
They became rich in black and white and gray tones, and the drama was greater,
perhaps. The specific images were of embryo shapes and cyclical formations.

For some reason I was unable to pull out the real meaning in the prints. I think
part of what held me back was the inability to totally identify what issues I was dealing
with. I do know that I was trying to make a statement about feminist ideas and
concerns important in my life. I was just unable to say specifically what those were.

When I started working again last year this dark side totally surfaced. It took
over my thoughts, my dreams and visualizations of things I wanted to make. I had saved
up over a year’s worth of fears and anxieties of having a baby and being a mother. The
manifestation of this was weird creatures -- deformed babies, oversized organs and
oozing pods. I no longer wanted to make two-dimensional work. When I saw pieces
inside my head they were objects -- sculptural things. I couldn’t squeeze them into a
flat, two dimensional form. The look of my work became scary and ugly.
The first piece I made was about my mother, appropriately called "Ma" (Plate I). She had sent me her old clothespin bag and I wanted to make something very special from it. This clothespin bag seemed to be very representative of my mother; she was always doing laundry. This is how I will remember her, so I wanted the piece to partially be about that. Also, I wanted it to encompass some of what I represented as a mother. I transformed the bag into a pair of breasts -- to me an obvious and important symbol of motherhood. From there the opening at the top center became a neckline, which I adorned with lace. Later, it looked like a vaginal opening, so I showed it giving forth a bloodied mass of clothespins. This is where the ugliness began to surface. What I had wanted to be beautiful was taking on an odd twist. In an effort to further my idea of "mother", and perhaps to balance the gross quality of the birth canal opening, I gave the object wings. The wings represented the saintly, angelic attributes that a woman must possess to withstand motherhood. These were made of work gloves to better represent my own mother's hands. They are large, working hands -- the kind that work hard for years to support children.

For the most part I am pleased with the results of this piece. It looks the way I wanted it to -- old, worn and kind of painful. It does, however, contain a slight element of humor with which I'm not completely comfortable. The patchwork quality created by piecing together lace, gloves, patterned fabric and rubber nipples gives it a slightly clown-like appearance. I feel an incredible amount of success with this piece. For the first time I was not just presenting an idea, but I was reacting to, and interacting with, the piece as I was making it.

The personal success I experienced, though, gave me the confidence to dive into more work with fewer inhibitions. The next few pieces were directly inspired by my
postnatal experiences. My aim was to mimic the bloated, seeping feeling I was having. I wanted to tell the world the secret realities of the labor room. I felt I could make things look as ugly and as scary as they felt to me. Consequently the following works became directly narrative of this.

I made a piece called "Afterbirth", inspired by that very thing. It looked somewhat like the sack used in illustrations with storks carrying babies, but was yellowed and covered with the textures of blood and tissue. It also contained a facsimile of a vein and artery swirling through it. To try to broaden the scope of it's meaning I added a light, glowing from within.

A second, related piece was a hanging pod form. The pod, made of plastic pants, oozed burrs onto a mound beneath it, from which sprung fresh, leafy forms. This piece made obvious reference to my recent physical experiences. Both of these two pieces were successful in their preliminary intention. Because of their strong narrative nature it was difficult to reach much further than their specifically intended but somewhat limited meanings.

During the time that I was working on these I was also making a series of deformed babies from molded polyurethane foam. Through surface decoration they became quite gruesome. I made an attempt at giving them purpose, or putting them in perspective. I used the same process that I found successful previously in the piece called "Ma". I would have a hint of an idea about what the piece meant and try combining various materials and objects with what I already had. Over a period of weeks I attempted several additions, things that resembled bodily organs, angelic references, normal looking baby parts. I searched for a meaning to emerge, and it never did. I decided to no longer struggle, so the piece was left unresolved, and I moved on.
The next piece, "Time Running Out" (Plate II), came spontaneously and easily. This piece was inspired by the feeling I'd had of time running out for me. It seemed to me the many aspects of my life were demanding decisions all at the same time. I'd collected a small bunch of seed pods weeks earlier wanting to use them in a piece. I began by working the pieces, trying to fit them together like a puzzle. When I grouped them they reminded me of ovaries. I began to think of it as a biological clock of sorts. I could hold it in my hand and think of it as a fetish, or a small religious statue. I gave it a halo made from artery looking strands. At this point I switched from a more intuitive mode to consciously analyzing before deciding what to do next. I searched for a gold, challis type cup on which to place this statue. This furthered the religious connection but gave the piece a sense of self-consciousness because of the obvious religious nature of a gold challis.

I was very pleased. The look of the finished piece was odd, almost surreal - a very organic configuration put on a gold, adorned pedestal. It indicated something to be worshipped, yet it was unlike other religious statues one is used to seeing.

This became an important transition piece in my work. I was able to stretch and reinforce the concept of this piece in a way I hadn't been able to before. It visually created an interesting, complex picture. It contained narrative qualities as well as other, more visceral, emotional reactions.

The concept of a biological clock becoming an object of worship presented an interesting point of view to me. It gave me the ability to put into words, through visual images, something I'd been feeling but was unable to translate. Being a mother had become for me almost a religious lifestyle. I had changed my life dramatically to become a responsible parent. I had given up many simple things which suddenly became
luxuries. Yet, like a nun, or priest, or monk I was given a more fulfilling life in exchange for my sacrifices. Every aspect of my living took on a greater direction, a greater purpose. A good deal of my thesis work is based on this idea and what I have become due to the changes. I have tried to focus on seeing more clearly the affected relationships with my family members as well as highly personal experiences.

After completing the clock piece, working in the studio began to calm down. My mind seemed cleared of the clutter of undefined, emotional intensity. I knew that any new work could talk about the same intensity of emotion, but could be quieter, more dignified. I wanted to maintain a slight connection with the religious aspect of my lifestyle. However, I wanted to use tools and symbols of my own instead of direct religious references. Martyrdom, sainthood and suffering were things I recalled learning about in my Catholic upbringing. In a very exaggerated sense I was able to relate those ideas to my mothering experiences. I tried carefully not to convey that I was putting myself in the same arena with the Catholic saints and martyrs. My intention was more to make suggestions of a religious connection.

When I started recalling stories of sainthood, Joan of Arc came to mind. She triggered a series of thoughts of having to go to battle and what my armor would consist of. This was direct inspiration for a piece titled "Shield" (Plate III), as well as being a more subjective and abstract inspiration for later pieces.

I look at my personal battle as simply being a good mother, a good mate, a good artist and trying to maintain my sense of self in the midst of giving so much to others in my life. This creates an opportunity for vulnerability, and I wanted to convey this. I discovered that using materials like fabric and paraffin created a translucency and a fragility that is vulnerable and seemingly unable to protect. This presents an interesting
conflict with the idea of what a shield is. To further this contrast I searched for more tools that represent me -- items that aid in my nurturing activities. I tried to use these kinds of items at various times while making later pieces. They are household items -- a broom, forks, stools, sewing items, etc. What I found that contrasted best with the waxy surface of the shield were forks. I made them resemble sharp, little fingers poking at my armor.

While I was constructing this piece I was also waxing some of my son’s old baby shirts. I was forming them in gestural poses, like little angels flying. They are angelic, but yellowed and dirty -- more like nasty little angels. I look upon these as muses that entered my life when I became a mother. They become wing-like forms to another tool of mine -- a broom. One intention of mine for this untitled piece (Plate IV) was to emphasize the weathered quality of the broom. I hope that people see it as somewhat neglected -- not used to it’s fullest potential, as I have felt during my mothering experience. The broom has swept in only one direction as my energies have been focused in one direction.

The excitement I was feeling from the evolution and personal success of these pieces stimulated my creative energies in an enormous way. Ideas and metaphors came to me quickly. My awareness of objects around me was heightened. One day, I had an aesthetic experience with one particular storm drain. It seemed to come alive and emerge from the ground as if it were part of the earth -- not just put there. I felt akin to the structure. It seemed very feminine to me. Here was this giant orifice taking things in and then giving things up -- always ready to accept and give. It had the same selfless quality that I had felt many times. It contained physical metaphors also. There
was a resemblance of a shield, and a bone structure that remained after the flesh was
gone. I wanted to make this drain into what I experienced it as.

The materials I chose to create "Drain" (Plate V), were those I used before --
wax, fabric and plant life on top of a wire mesh structure. The look I strove for -- bony,
spiny, organic -- was accomplished. It took on a gestural curving that almost animated
it, as if it were once alive. At this point I had to resort to conscious decision making to
create a base. I think this became a drawback of the piece. The base I constructed was
made of wooden slats and resembled a raft, or a stretcher. I am pleased with the
connotation of these two items and liked how new ideas grew out of the piece.
However, the piece stands somewhat unresolved and, at this point, can almost be two
separate pieces.

Throughout the creation of the last few pieces the idea of a biological clock
strongly remained with me. I wanted to remake the biological clock piece. The seed
pods had deteriorated, and I also wanted something that looked more like the new work.
I began "Time Running (Plate VI) by casting acorn squash, again with cloth and wax,
because of their engorged, breast-like quality. I really wanted to emphasize the
sensation of these bulbous forms being covered over by time. I visualized them having
a thick gray cloud, or skin being pulled over them. I became quite involved in
manipulating the materials. The bulbous squash forms were like puzzle pieces and they
nylon hosiery I used for the skin had a strange elasticity and translucency to it. The
finished piece is more difficult to explain than past work. It is surreal looking and has
strong sexual overtones. I think that any original narrative I had in mind became lost.
The purely sculptural, formal qualities took over. Because of the little conscious effort
put into conveying my idea, I discovered more and more about the materials and let other, perhaps related, ideas evolve.

At this time I introduced a new material to the work. I started driving on the highway an awful lot, and to pass time, I would really explore the roadside environment. A large number of trees had been cut down and were left lying on the side of the road. Often there were also rolled bundles of fencing. For weeks I drove back and forth looking at these. It was like seeing bodies strewn along the ground. It had a destructive nature about it -- things torn down and left. I thought about this image a great deal and wanted to explore it further. At about the same time my sleep patterns became disrupted.

The next piece, "Sleep" (Plate VII), is about a combination of these experiences. Like the previous piece, I became excited about manipulating different materials. I liked combining contrasting things such as nylon hosiery, tar, burlap and, of course, the log. The log became representative of a body -- a shell -- a tense, rigid object. The hosiery gave a soft, obscuring quality, like sleep. Besides these two points there is no indication of a narrative. Again, I think the piece became more about the object than telling the story of my disrupted sleep. At least, they were joined to a much greater extent.

I was intrigued by this occurrence. This taking over of materials seemed somewhat out of my control, and certainly beyond my initial intentions. I had intended to be narrative, but liked the change that had occurred over the last two pieces. My next intention, then, was to try to combine the two different styles. It was not totally successful. The new pieces were still narrative and didn't fully realize the connection with the materials as fully as they might.
For the first time I wanted to make a piece about my family, not just myself. The next three pieces all became centered around this idea. I tried to describe for myself what the essence of our relationship was. It seemed like we were bound together somehow – we are permanently attached to our situation. It also seems that upon becoming a family our lives have become about work. We all work hard to achieve things -- from materials things to ethereal things. I began to think of the basis of our relationship as a found object -- something not quite made to our specifications -- something we've had to adapt. I collected various objects that could be representative of this. Again they were household objects -- stools, tools, old wood and logs.

The first piece I constructed, called "What's Between" (Plate VIII), is somewhat a portrait of these ideas. It contains a familial grouping of logs, a spring, lace, wire, nails. This grouping is presented on an unfinished stool-like pedestal.

The second piece is an installation. I titled it "Labor" (Plate IX) making reference to birth as well as the labors of my family. I made a conscious effort to combine unrelated objects here, as I had done previously with "Shield" and "Untitled". The overall feeling of the installation is altar-like. This is created by the structure formed when I hung a dress pattern on a clothesline. This served as a backdrop to gilded chair with a forked back, and a log in which is wedged a nail claw. The three groups could become three separate pieces. However, I think as a trinity they create a cascade of metaphors about my family situation and the labors we endure. The narrative remains but is more open; the materials are developing in number and visual difference.

The final piece, "Ours" (Plate X), is the most unresolved of all the thesis work. It has remained in its initial conceptual state. The piece is reminiscent of a household
decoration, or a plaque. Again, it contains unrelated objects. This time, though, it is more difficult to create a relationship between them. My choice of objects is more arbitrary than in the past. The objects are a gauzy package of gilded fruits, a large spoon covered with a twist of twine, and a work glove. My aim was to present a kind of heaven and earth landscape in which my family lives. The plaque concept presents them but doesn’t yet draw conclusions in a narrative or formal sense.

In the end I feel like the body of work falls into two different categories. One group is more narrative and contains a relationship of different objects. The other group is more intuitive and formal, and contains a relationship of different materials. I find that the work fluctuates between the two. There is not one piece that I feel contains a perfect marriage of the two styles. In the future it would be my aim to achieve this marriage. In fact, I plan to rework some of these pieces to push them to that edge of success.

One way that I did seem to find success is in the presentation of my narrative. I feel like I didn’t have to lay out the whole specific storyline. Rather, I suggested an aura of my experiences that contained more than a single viewpoint. This is more evident when seeing the whole body of work instead of just one piece or another. I liked being able to present certain puzzle pieces and then have confidence that a viewer could complete the puzzle. The whole picture is much more than the sum of single parts. Part of the enjoyment and the payoff of creating this body of work was knowing that it is just the beginning of what I will do, and what I am capable of creating.
TIME RUNNING OUT, PLATE II
SHIELD, PLATE III
SLEEP, PLATE VII
WHAT'S BETWEEN, PLATE VIII
LABOR, PLATE IX
OUR'S, PLATE X