Examining Domesticity and Relating to “the Other” Through Raising Silkworms Within Constructed Art Spaces

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

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The Ohio State University

2011

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Abstract

This body of research examines both the cyclic nature of lifecycles and the finite life expectancy of individuals through raising domesticated silkworms. It seeks to support a greater understanding of another species, soliciting empathy as it draws parallels between human behavior and those of silkworms/moths. Lastly, the creative research is realized through beautiful yet dilapidated spaces for the purpose of housing the insects in life and death.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my family.

I am honored and amazed by the support and love with which they have surrounded me.
Acknowledgments

I want to thank my committee for their insight and investment in my development. My advisor, Charles Massey, Jr. has always been available and has connected with my work with such depth that I have sometimes thought he understands it better than I do. I am grateful to Pheoris West who has been willing to talk about the spiritual nature of my work, seeing it authentically without over intellectualizing my process or products. And I do not believe I could have gotten to this place in time without the influence of Amy Youngs. Her positive energy surrounds each meeting. Her technical prowess, knowledge of contemporary artists working in similar ways and effective communication has allowed me to dig into my own practice in completely new ways.

My committee meetings have been the very most valuable experiences among dozens of formative ones I have gained as a graduate student.

This work and experience would not have been possible without the encouragement, support, love and wisdom of my family and closest friends. Thank you to my parents who have always encouraged me to be myself and to follow my dreams. Thank you to Lia Eastep and Jillian Harris Davis who inspired me to return to college, as they had done before me. They have understood the intensity and supported me in my growth and development. Lia has been the
primary editor and proof reader of my written work. She has given me opportunity to process my thoughts and to play. Jillian has developed further as my creative collaborator, sharing her passion, ideas and time to strengthen my concepts and artwork. The newest members in my collection of wonderful friends are my studio-mates, Susana Alvarez and Rachel Heberling. We have grown together even as we have more deeply discovered ourselves. Their insights and understanding have allowed me to surrender to the experience of graduate school.

My wonderful son Ely has provided me with endless inspiration and gentle support. He has joined me in my learning process in the studio, on field trips, at artist lectures and on graduate outings. He has given quality feedback to me and my classmates. Always available to brainstorm and to make me laugh with his spirited humor, I love him unconditionally and am grateful to have him in my world. My final acknowledgement goes to my amazing partner, the love of my life, my husband Steven Anthony Lombardi. In these last two years, he has taught me so much about love, companionship and perseverance. He has encouraged me and propelled me forward. He has held me to my ideas, not allowing me to settle for less than the whole of my vision. His expertise and hard work have been an imperative part in completing my thesis work. I have always known that Steve was the one for me, but his dedication to my success has made me see our love anew.
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       News (a publication of the National Art Education Association)

   “Portfolio Preparation Tips for Teachers” article in SchoolArts

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   “How to Prepare Yourself for a Portfolio Review” article in National Art Honor
   Societies News

2006  “Butterfly Booklaces” article in Somerset Studio
Fields of Study

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Introduction

Raising silkworms is a layered pastime that has recently become an important part of my artmaking. Silkworms are extinct in the wild, only able to exist under the care of humans. Placing the insects within dilapidated, domestic spaces, I am attempting to invoke a sense of wonder by creating places that resemble daydreams, allowing the viewer to be lost in reverie – a fantastic, visionary idea. These works build off the objects of one of the pioneers of assemblage art, American artist Joseph Cornell as I specifically select and place objects to create a dialogue. I look to the works of contemporary German artist Anselm Kiefer as inspiration through his decayed, distressed yet beautiful, objects that hold memory as I create intimate assemblage works include actual and implied dollhouses, miniature beds, stairways, windows, doors, abandoned cocoons, expired moths and tiny unhatched eggs. Mixed-media works use objects and projection to attract the viewer with light, shadow and living creatures. While still looking to Johannes Vermeer and Edward Hopper for strategy and nuance in the incorporation of light and shadow, increasingly as I integrate technology in nonobtrusive ways, I look to American artists Bill Viola, Dan Flavin and Ted Victoria for inspiration. I strive to fold together many disparate elements into unified theatrical objects, and for this I look to American artist and film maker Julie Taymor in how she brings to her viewers specific visual presence within her ambitious projects. I honor the cycle of fragile lives in these slow-motion portraits of dependency and triumph. The insects operate as a biological metaphor that I use to address states of psychological relationships. I am building upon the work of writer/professor Donna Haraway and writer/educator Joanne Elizabeth Lauck in the way I position insects as different but equal “others”. The objects in my work speak of home, both as a place for shelter and
sometimes a self-imposed prison, and for this I reference the work of 18th century, Italian printmaker Giovanni Battista Piranesi who etched many stages of prison-like interiors within his architectural spaces. The content of my work is both personal and universal. To better understand myself and relate to others, I have combed through An American Childhood by Annie Dillard and examined both Dominion of the Dead by Robert Pogue Harrison and Species of Spaces by George Perec, borrowing language from each of them to detail mood and meaning implied in the work.
Chapter One: Examination of the Course of Study/Process and Timeline

My sixth brood of silkworms lived within the dilapidated space of my art at the Urban Arts Space in Columbus, Ohio. There were twenty-seven of them living on a brass bed from a doll house, eating a blanket and pillow made of rehydrated, emulsified mulberry leaves. The insects were within Caterpillar House, one of two works there that marked the culmination of my graduate school experience.

Last summer I raised three broods of silkworms. They spun nearly one hundred cocoons in two different miniature houses. Now the moths lie dead, having fulfilled their ambition to lay thousands of fertilized eggs. Before our collaboration to make Caterpillar House, I worked in tandem with the insects to develop Moth House. Before it was Moth House, it was an abandoned doll’s house, perhaps thirty years old. I think that is much longer in dollhouse years. Like my own childhood doll house, it was cared for once. Built by hand, wallpapered, floors covered, but that was a long time ago.

Neglected, discarded, unwanted it was on its way to the dumpster when I intervened. In the summer of 2009, the dollhouse lived in the temporary art studio where I taught Montessori children, including my son Ely. At the end of the summer, I took it home. It sat in my living room, and I spent hours with it, pondering my upcoming transition into the Master of Fine Arts program at The Ohio State University.

By then my first brood of silkworms had lived and died. I did not yet see how raising silkworms would connect to the difficult narrative I have investigated as a graduate student about domestication, dependency, addiction and coming to terms with death, all while embracing life.
I did not know that this dollhouse, at once abandoned and full, would provide the imagery and setting for my concepts to unfold. But, I did see that caring for the insects was my first conceptual art piece.

I got my first twenty-seven silkworms from Columbus School for Girls the previous Spring. Their amazing Program for Young Children (PYC) was one place I substituted in my “gap year” as I applied to graduate programs and lived without health insurance. Bringing the silkworms home coincided with releasing a painted lady butterfly that Ely, my son, and I had raised from a caterpillar in a tiny lidded cup. We got that first caterpillar on a field trip to the conservatory and he knew all along that we had to let it fly away after it transformed. But when that morning came, it made him so sad. I thought at the time that the silkworms would be perfect to raise. I knew that they were flightless. We could not let them go. I learned much later that flying was only one trait that had been bred out of them. I did not know yet that they were extinct in the wild.

When it was time for them to spin, I invited them to choose spaces in my Inventory Boxes, pieces of art that were part shelf/part roosting place that had been crafted to my specification by my husband years before. The insects liked the weathered wood and obliged me. All of them spun; most emerged and many mated. They laid a lot of eggs on the boxes, and I ended up with about four hundred that were viable. When the moths died, I drew their delicate, creamy white bodies.

I started graduate school on my fortieth birthday. As I moved into my new, shared studio space, I brought the dollhouse and a couple of hundred eggs and prayed that my studio mates would accept these oddities. My wish was granted. Both women had played with caterpillars as children. When the second brood began to hatch, they celebrated with me, looking at their growth everyday and even sharing them with our peer group of sensitive and talented M.F.A. candidates. I discovered the Biological Science Library and researched my dear pets. Tweezers
and a magnifying glass were standard gear. One graduate student compared me to Darwin with my collections and my observations.

When I first arrived at The Ohio State University, I had several groups of imagery in mind. I set about making prints with chrysalis and moth imagery, soon adding cocoons and maps. I wanted to explore my sense of place and created my own map of OSU, including three academic halls (Haskett, Hopkins and Hayes), four libraries (Fine Art, Science and Engineering, Biology and Pharmacy and Thompson), the Wexner Center and the stadium (just for reference). Now, six quarters later, I would need only to add RPAC, Logan Elm Press, Central Classroom Services Building and one more hall (Derby) to keep my map complete.

I made a map of the west side of Columbus where I live with my husband and child and where I had lived with my parents and brother (where I have lived for more than three quarters of my life) for the purpose of sharing shopping locales for Asian and Latino foods as well as discount Chinese imports with graduate students from other states. I later transformed this into a map of my extended neighborhood to use as a lithography plate exploring the concepts about “staying”.

As I raised my second brood of silkworms, I drew them on my printmaking plates and carved them into relief works. I used the salvaged doll house as a shelf within my studio. Having molted twice before I brought them home, the first brood I raised was hardy and easy to care for. I discovered that rearing silkworms from hatchlings was much more difficult. I spent so much time removing each worm one-by-one with tweezers from the dry, skeletal mulberry leaves to place them onto fresh ones. They seemed to dehydrate into punctuation marks when I was not looking. Each day little commas that had once been bodies with life fell away. I resented them at first. “Stupid little things! Can you not even crawl to the new leaves that I drop on your heads?” I told myself that I did not even care if they died; they were too pathetic to live. But once they grew into teeny tiny versions of the beautiful white larvae that I had come to love, I could not help but care about their fate. As hundreds diminished to dozens, I felt like a bad mother.
As the season progressed, the once endless supply of mulberry leaves began to yellow and fall to the ground. I spritzed the leaves with water to try to supplement their moisture content. Silkworms do not drink; they rely on the leaves. Later, as the nights grew longer and colder, I made tiny frozen dinners for my bugs. I food-processed the last leaves with water and froze them into daily portions, each dated for freshness. I think that is when the hunger strikes began. Some of the caterpillars just refused to eat; healthy “S” posture was replaced by heads laid low. I had one small mulberry tree that my husband prepared to over-winter in the studio. I plucked its tiny leaves as soon as they sprouted, but many silkworms would not eat. They choose instead a slow, passive death. My enthusiasm dwindled as the body count rose. For each death I hummed a version of Taps as I disposed of their limp corpses. Their constant need for attention and obvious suffering started to remind me of human dependency issues.

The dollhouse attic served as the nursery for the bugs. They lived in a plastic tub, not caring about their surroundings. Instead of weeks, it took months for them to mature. The rest of the dollhouse rooms were littered with paper scraps, notes about student health services, names of artists who had been recommended and tidbits of one-hundred percent rag paper that I could not bear to recycle. My first quarter schedule required long hours away from my husband, son and home. I was often on campus thirteen hours a day, arriving home after Ely was asleep or more often keeping him up far too late for a third grader. This distance made it obvious that I never developed the discipline of housekeeping. The accumulations in the dollhouse mirrored the towering piles in my beautiful, chaotic home.

It was December seventh when the first worm spun. I failed to recognize the signs at first; he was so much smaller than expected and a full two weeks earlier than the rest. Winter break began, and I went to the studio everyday. Two more worms spun, and with nine larvae left, the frozen dinner supply dwindled to nothing. I was forced to switch to mail-order chow. More worms went on hunger strike. Most days I went in only to feed the worms. But as I recovered from the demands of my first quarter in graduate school, I sometimes stayed to work. It was at
this time that ideas surrounding the insects and the doll house started to come together into one visual statement.

I finished levigating my first stone and began drawing on its delicious surface with number five lithography pencils. The image was of an abandoned cocoon behind the stairs of a dollhouse with moth inspired wallpaper. As I rendered, I contemplated.

All at once I decided that the dollhouse needed to be remodeled a bit. The worms were getting interested in their environment and I invited them to spin within corners and crevices in the doll house. I spent most of my time adding new wallpaper to the bedroom which held a solitary piece of furniture, a rusty, painted white metal bed. The wallpaper design was of moths and cocoons, a lithograph printed on vellum. I added tiny countryside scenes of bridges over streams and woods to the wallpaper. I made the trees bare, just like the ones on the famous OSU oval. I aged and added the lithography map of my neighborhood to another wall in the bedroom, a woodcut of an adult cicada, a library table and a stairway to nowhere in the living room. Just as I finished, many of the worms searched for their place to transform within the house.

With three silkworms still eating, one spinning and with the first moth emerged, I had a desperate thought. It was December thirtieth and I realized that soon they would all be gone, dead or transformed, and that no one would ever know what I had learned through astute observation and care; their struggles to survive as compromised beings would go unnoticed by the world. So, I decided to video tape their final hours as larvae. I learned as I went, documenting the spinner and the surprising slow motion action of the nearly mature caterpillars as they consumed their final leaves.

In the end, only eleven of about two-hundred silkworms spun and only seven completed their cycle, emerging into adult moths. Six were male and with only one female the brood produced a single mating couple. Their emergence as moths conveniently coincided with the first year M.F.A. exhibition.
I configured the remodeled dollhouse, now titled *Moth House* (see appendix figure 1), complete with live moths inhabiting its interior rooms as my main work for the show. My edited video of caterpillars eating and spinning, telling their story in a slow loop was projected on the exterior of the house. Light leaked into the windows and door, creating long, dancing ribbons that further defined the architectural space as the remaining moths emerged, mated and lived their final hours in the Hopkins gallery.

Also included was a three-plate color lithograph featuring cocoons, silk moth, the same map of my neighborhood and wallpaper from a Pennsylvania Dutch house I had photographed the previous summer, titled *Settled In* (figure 2). At the reception, I was treated like an art star. I started actively fantasizing about life as a famous artist for the first time. My obsessed, convicted care had not resulted in a very successful brood of silkworms, but had brought forth some intriguing works of art.

Winter quarter, I set aside the silkworm emphasis to explore posable dolls and cicadas. I tried many things with my dolls as subject and object, eventually creating a narrative with xylene transfer made images. However, I discovered that while the dolls were an obvious stand in for humans, they did nothing to address developing empathy for “the other”. In actuality the doll imagery pulled viewers in unintended directions. Closer to silkworms, cicadas are insects that transform as a natural part of their lifecycle. In working with them, I used more projection, asked a friend to perform a piano score that cicadas had written early in the last century, recording her as I dabbled in sound design. As wild insects, I found the cicadas harder to access than the silkworms, especially in the winter. While these explorations were somewhat successful and important to the larger arc of my ideas, at the end of the quarter, I found that they did warrant any additional investigations as they did not continue to hold my interest. The silkworms deliver a much more dramatic difference from humans and through allowing my close observations, gave a chance to look more carefully at the metaphor I was developing in the work.
After the struggle to raise silkworms out of season in Ohio, I decided to follow the advice gleaned in my research and wait until the mulberry trees had buds to take any eggs out of cold storage. But by Spring quarter, I missed having bugs to watch and I captured some of the tent caterpillars that were so plentiful on campus. I documented their slow careful spinning and made several videos with and without them. Needing my work to be relevant to my life, I decided to dig into the themes of dependency and addiction by comparing the docile silkworm behaviors to those I saw in humans. I looked at my childhood doll house as a set for new drama intermingled with old memories to combine into a story for my viewer to decipher (figure 3). In the studio I used familiar techniques-ones that I taught in Two-Dimensional Art and that I had taught hundreds of students in one-day workshops for the past several years. While I made monotype prints and mixed media works of giant spinning caterpillars (figure 4), I listened to every episode on the radio archive of This American Life that touched on themes of drugs and alcohol. At home each night I read books about people living with addiction, written by family members and by the addicts. I read about why people make irrational decisions. I witnessed behaviors in the domesticated silkworms who are completely dependant on humans for their survival that reminded me of certain obsessive human behaviors. During most of their time as larvae, the insects are unaware of their surroundings and will not try to leave. It is only when they are ready to spin cocoons that they become selective in their whereabouts. I noticed all the energy they expended as they sought the “perfect place”, sometimes dying before they could be satisfied. This reminded me of humans who settle into certain situations that do not please them, but rather than moving on, they spend their whole lives wandering in discontent. The comparisons to addiction were apparent to me in the cyclic and often deadly behaviors participated in by both the insects and humans. I saw singular focus on a substance and constant quest to obtain it (mulberry leaves/drugs) as well as insatiable appetite. No matter the amount of leaves I brought to the silkworms, they remained hungry. For them, eating more and more led to the end of their lives as larvae. To the addicts, the fanatic compulsions led to the death of all other aspects of their lives. Layers and repetition were used in my art work at this time as well as dripping paint to relate to the themes of dependency and addiction. I knew at the time that the work did not express these ideas overtly, and I was at peace with that.
As Spring quarter advanced, more than two hundred silkworms hatched from tiny eggs and demanded my attention as they tempted my imagination. As they neared time to spin in early June, I created a new place for them to live. The new house would be stripped down, the archetype house. Out of our old backyard swing, gray, faded wood with bits of white paint here and there, a triangle roof structure atop a rectangle house frame emerged. No walls, no shingles, only a door, one window and a platform holding a small, brass bed. This space unfolded throughout the summer months, gaining a double staircase, about forty cocoons, dozens of eggs and a collection of expired moths. I tended to their needs, watched them live and die, recorded over twelve hours of video documentation and started to discover what my thesis was to be about.

My life and studies force me to grow. I am learning that all life is finite, and many things go wrong. Recently, I talked to a classmate about the worms. I said, “Sometimes your interventions backfire. You see them suffering and you try to go in and help, but it ends up causing more suffering. And then they die. Slowly.” Because their main objective as larvae is to eat and grow, with silkworms, the better care they get the shorter lives they live. With each new brood, I figure so much out. Instead of months of witnessing long drawn-out deaths, my third brood thrived. They went from hatching to laying eggs in just eight weeks. I gave the caterpillars fresh mulberry leaves as many as nine times a day. Not everyone survives. I nearly suffocated the whole brood about halfway through as I sought to keep them hydrated. One died (slowly) from a spider bite. A few others got crushed when I added branches as enrichment to their habitat.

Two more cycles completed themselves that summer and I mourned the end of each. The miniature houses are full of evidence, comers crowded with cocoons, eggs lain on many surfaces, dozens of finished moths, some in every room. Not living, yet full of life. I can see how time is limited in the insect world and better understand this truth for humans. I see that suffering is a part of life and have come to terms with its brevity. I accept my role as a
participant in the lives of the insects and the place of a non-judgmental observer in the human lives I am a part of.

I want to share with the viewer my empathy for other species, draw parallels between human behavior and those of silkworms/moths and bring my vision of beautiful, yet dilapidated spaces into reality

Silkworms are extinct in the wild, only able to exist under the care of humans. They hatch from hundreds of freckle-sized eggs as tiny larvae and eat exclusively mulberry leaves, almost continually for four to five weeks. Then they never eat again. So many die; often slowly, appearing to suffer. If they live to spin, they become interested in their surroundings for the first and last time in their lives. Sometimes they become so choosy that they cannot select a suitable place and they die; expending all of their energy seeking the perfect space. For the successful ones, cocoon creation takes anywhere from a day to a week. Tucked away in their constructed safety it takes them two weeks to transform. They secrete a fluid that makes a hole from which they escape. They crawl out into the world as adult moths. This life lasts ten days at the most during which their only goals are to mate and lay eggs. Their wings are too short to allow flight. These brief weeks are lived in captivity; a slow careful dance with many variables leading to premature death. Their cycle repeats itself endlessly as a beautiful indicator that life continues. They become moths for no other reason than because they survived and the new form better suits the adult needs to mate and lay eggs.

Placing the insects within dilapidated domestic spaces, I am interested in invoking a sense of wonder, creating places that resemble daydreams. Intimate assemblage works include actual and implied dollhouses, miniature beds, stairways, windows, doors, abandoned cocoons, expired moths and tiny unhatched eggs. Mixed-media works use objects and projection to attract the viewer with light, shadow and living creatures. I honor the cycle of fragile lives in these slow-motion portraits of dependency and triumph. The insects operate as a biological metaphor connecting human and insect behaviors. I use this to address states of psychological
relationships that range from compulsion, discontent and co-dependency to acceptance and love. The objects speak to home as place for shelter while also referencing the physical disarray and psychic shambles of a self-imposed prison.
Chapter Two: Exploring Imagery

At the time of my fourth quarter review, committee member Pheoris West encouraged me to decode my visual language. It was at that time that I began to really take notice of my own culled set of imagery. For example, my objects were not doll houses, though they referenced them through shape and content. The art contained a few key elements connecting them to home; most had been stripped away. The remaining sparse furniture included beds, a table or bench and interior stairs-often leading to nowhere. The first structure retained its “house ness” with walls, floors, rooms, windows and the like. More recent objects exist without such distinctions of space: an open door embedded within a wall-less wall, window into a floorless attic and stairs pulled from their interior, standing on their own. I was left to decipher what I might mean with these deliberate decisions.

Also, the work is relentlessly filled with the reoccurring theme of insects that reinvent themselves as a part of their life cycle. At each exhibition, viewers ask, “What will you do with the silk?” And each time I explain that I will do nothing with the silk. It is the reason this species is extinct in the wild. It is the reason they cannot fly and they will die waiting for a
mulberry leaf to drop on their heads. My intention is to let them live as themselves, to facilitate completion of their life process.

Numerous books became important in articulating what was said in my work with bugs and decayed spaces. The first of great importance became The Voice of the Infinite in the Small, Revisioning the Insect Human Connection. Its’ author, Joanne Elizabeth Lauck quotes Chief Seattle, “Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web he does to himself.” (179). And she aptly describes my affinity to use moths to represent the spiritual and enduring life force, “Both insects [moths and butterflies] were believed to know the secrets of moving from life to death to new life” (228). I like that there is such mystery in this process; that lowly silkworms with too few brain cells to call a brain, have mastered complete metamorphosis. I am intrigued by the notion that insects have a different but equal intelligence to that of my own species.

While tempted to allow the stairs, the door the bed to remain concealed muses, I also sought to understand their role in my work. In his book Species of Spaces, Georges Perec describes the power of spaces and objects within them in ways that make sense to me. He says of staircases, “We don’t think enough about staircases” and “We should learn to live more on staircases, but how?” (38). I encourage this investigation by taking away the rest and leaving the viewer no choice but to explore the transitory space of the stairs as a chance to pause and contemplate their own place in life. Like the complete change of form seen in the silk moths, humans can also evolve in appearance (especially through the natural course of aging), character (through self-improvement efforts) and circumstances (by accepting the changes brought forth by the passing of time and moving onward).

About doors Perec says, “We protect ourselves, we barricade ourselves in. Doors stop and separate.” (37). And, “The door breaks space in two, splits it, prevents osmosis, imposes a partition. One side, me and my place, the private, the domestic (a space overfilled with my
possessions: my bed…my table…my books); on the other side, other people, the world, the public, politics” (37).

In my work, the doors are open, their glass is broken and sometimes they are within an open wall space, letting the public seep in, violate the space, leaving its inhabitants vulnerable and tainted by the world. This visually acknowledges the passing of time and reveals the accumulation of experiences. The open shell leaves the creatures inside susceptible to harm, open to moral attack, criticism, temptation, etc., announcing our exposed reality to the “public” realm.

Relating to beds Perec tells us, “The resurrected space of the bedroom is enough to bring back to life, to recall, to revive memories, the most fleeting anodyne along with the most essential.” (21). About being in bed, he shares “I like my bed. I like to stretch out on my bed and to gaze at the ceiling with a tranquil eye. I would gladly devote the major part of my time to this (the mornings mainly) were I not so often prevented by supposedly more urgent occupations (to list them would be tedious)” (18). My favorite bed quote is shared by Perec, but belongs to Michel Leiris, “Lit = ile”, literally “bed = island”; Leiris implies that the closeness in sound between these two French words also implies the closeness in their meaning (17). My bed tempts me. I loathe leaving it in the morning and I long to return to it before it is time. It is this chance for comfort even within wide open architecture that the beds advertise within my work-a safe space to live, spin and mate for my insects. The beds offer a counterpoint of comfort, belonging and acceptance to the often hostile housing. A place for relief, a needed rest period for the compromised beings of both the silkworms and the humans they reference.
Chapter Three: Taking a Closer Look at Individual Works

*Mulberry Leaves and Heroin* (figure 5)

A one-page book that folds upon itself, this work operates on many levels. It is a direct response to my investigations on addiction and dependency as witnessed through raising silkworms and through living with drug and alcohol dependant humans. It is a “Zine”, created in multiple on a photocopier, allowing me to give it away to other people, a powerful keepsake. One side of the book structure is composed of pen drawings of my precious pets, drawn mostly from life in the summer of 2010 when both house structures where full of living insects. To scale drawings of each stage of the silkworm/moth cycle show both life and death as many turn to few and moths get trapped in their own webs. The reverse side holds a poem I wrote about heroin addiction, utilizing journal notes made while raising silkworms in doll house spaces. I gave copies to my faculty, many classmates, my closest friends and my family members. This work is my most successful to date in addressing the dependency and addiction aspects of my research as it compares the insects’ single-minded focus to consume mulberry leaves with that of the addict to consume drugs. It draws a parallel to the (often horrifying) cyclic existence of insects and addicts, showcasing sadness and loss. While frustration and concern are voiced, the tone of the poem is of acceptance and compassion.

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Reliquary (figure 6)
In the summer of 2010, I visited the Museum of Biological Diversity at The Ohio State University. While there I spoke with faculty and staff members who are experts in their field. Lucianna Musetti, PhD, spent a lot of time with me in the entomology lab and told me how to preserve caterpillars and larva. At the time, I did not know what I would do with this information. But a few weeks later when members of my large brood of newly hatched silkworms started dying, I knew how to preserve them and did so with intentions for my artwork.

At the same time that I was preserving my fragile friends, I was experiencing and processing human loss. A friend who is a mother succumbed to cancer. Two daughters of friends, one nineteen, and the other twenty died of heroin overdoses. I looked at my lifeless insects and suffered with all the sadness that death brings. And my ideas began to grow.

Rather than death, I wanted to focus on the light I had witnessed in the short lives of these beautiful (human and other) species. I assembled the vials of preserved remains along with cocoons, and small intaglio prints of living insects, spinning, eating and mating. I decided to illuminate the work with a fluorescent puck light from behind to reintroduce the life that had been lost. For a backdrop, I created a painting to infuse the space with the optimism and warmth of a range of greens. Each of these art elements creates a separate layer, all of which are needed to pull together the final visual statement that conveys the meaning.

Moth House (cloaked) (figure 7)
Still mourning the loss of my insects and humans, I returned to Moth House. The house was filled with cocoons (both abandoned and full of pupas that never emerged), departed moths and wasted eggs. Many of the deceased moths were being attacked by bee mites, invisible culprits eating away at their bodies. Still full cocoons were being eaten by boll weevils. The house contained life, but now represented death and decay. Its presence in my studio made me sad and I sought a way to transform Moth House so that I might enjoy it again.
Inspired by one of the destinations on MJ Bole’s field trip seminar course, I added a cloak. When we visited the Funerary Museum on October 16, 2010, I was taken by a display of a female mannequin with historic mourning garments. A long, black and fringed scarf covered her head, shoulders and upper torso. Even as a staged display, I felt the message and I thought, “I have experienced that. I have longed for an exterior expression to distance me from everyday living while I recover from tremendous personal loss.” The idea of looking at the world through shear black resonated with me and I fashioned my own long, black, sheer, fringed scarf onto the roof of the house, draping down over the front and softly into the door and windows. This provided viewers with additional context in which to view the work, soliciting reverence. Next, I enlivened some of the empty cocoons by filling them with LED (light-emitting diode) lights. With the cloak enveloping the glowing cocoons the house was filled with warmth, suitable to honor of its former inhabitants.

*Gendered Moth Boxes performance* (figure 8)

Just as I finished work on *Reliquary*, the final moths of my fifth brood emerged within small decorative boxes that had pleased the silkworms enough for them to spin. Coincidentally, two male moths emerged in the faux-aged box that was located in my OSU studio which I had titled *Life (and Death) Box*. Within the rust colored, tattered found box at my home, two females started their lives as adults. My first impulse was to get the boxes together to facilitate mating. But the mornings of my chilly autumn commute were inappropriate to do so. I again was faced with the prospect that so many hours of my careful attention would be unknown and the lives and deaths of my prized insects would pass unnoticed. It was at this time that I started to think about an event…a moth performance to bring the boxes together. I knew as soon as the males smelled the pheromones, they would “perform” spirited flapping and acrobatic maneuvering to try to be the lucky one to mate.

I chose a spot on the Hasket Hall sound stage with a heavy black velvet curtain. I recorded myself speaking a version of my artist statement, which details the life cycle of the insects. I embellished the information about their adult lives and outlined the current situation with the
gendered moth boxes. I added the previously recorded sounds of flapping wings. I wore all black in an effort to blend in with the curtain, becoming only hands and a head to keep the focus on the moths. I was staging my first performance to take place during ART661 Bio Art class all in an effort to get people to pay attention to the moths. My idea was more or less an elaborate introduction to witness the moths’ mating dance. On the day of the performance, I carried along the box with the “girls” to build interest and to keep them sequestered. I thought of it as the Pheromone Box. Finally, it was time. I closed Pheromone Box completely, turned on the soundtrack and took my place in front of the curtain, beside the pedestal that held the “boy” moths within its drawers. I clutched Pheromone Box in front of me and gazed down upon it. Not moving while my disembodied voice told the story of the silkworms. When the soundtrack (abruptly) stopped, I turned toward the pedestal, placed Pheromone Box next to Life (and Death) Box and gently opened it. Then turned and walked away.

The audience was unsure what to do, so I circulated through, lightly touching a few spectators on the arm and offered, “You should move closer to see what is happening.” The crowd gathered around and watched the drama unfold. I had two photographers and a video running to capture the show. As expected, the male moths furiously flapped and made their way into Pheromone Box. One male was successful in coupling, the other was rejected. He was too late; she had already laid her (unfertilized) eggs. The inside, top of Pheromone Box was lined with gold, pleated fabric and served as a perfect stage curtain to accent the action. I felt pleased to bring this important aspect of the insects’ life to a group of humans who may otherwise fail to realize its reality at all. Afterwards, many of the eyewitnesses shared their new found empathy with me. One person even cried a few tears for the unsuccessful couple. For days, people checked in with me to learn the status of the moth partners. These responses showed me that the performance was a success.

10 days to make it happen (figure 9)

For this project, I wanted to focus on the ten days in which the adult moths live out their drama. After reviewing approximately twelve hours of my video footage, I captured segments having to
do with adult female moths calling for a partner, mating sequences, additional male mating activity and females laying eggs. I knew I wanted a slow, simple edit only using cross fades (no flashy effects) and without a voice over. I wanted the moth footage to “speak” for itself.

In my rough draft, I featured two mating pairs. Each of them was successful in coupling. They were in very different environments within one house structure. One couple was on a miniature bed while the other was on a weathered ledge. At this time, I considered several different directions for the work. One was to show a montage of successful mating. Another idea was to focus on male moths that were unable to secure a mate, fluttering their wings until they tired and died. A third idea was to combine the ideas, showing a more comprehensive concept of moth mating including females laying eggs.

After meeting with Dr. Nancy Jesser, my faculty member for COMPSTD 535/WOMSTD535Gender, Sexuality and Science and carefully considering the message I wanted to generate, I decided to edit a video that shared the whole spectrum of mating experiences I had witnessed within both house structures.

I was influenced by many of the articles that I read for the course. The ones about technologies of reproduction and gender seemed especially relevant considering the very specific gender roles I had witnessed and documented in the moths. I wanted to help the viewer empathize with the insects as I had done in Gendered Moth Boxes, inspired in part by Donna Haraway, “Morphing the Order: Flexible Strategies, Feminist Science Studies and Primate Revisions.” With the up close and personal viewpoint of the video footage, I also realized that I was bringing a voyeuristic, perhaps even a “scopaphelic” point of view as seen by Dickinson in Jenny Terry, “Anxious Slippages Between “Us” and “Them” When considering the unsuccessful males and my perception of their suffering, I thought about the stigma of impotence that we saw explored and exploited in Chris Wienke, “Male Sexuality, Medicalization and the Marketing of Cialis and Levitra.”
For my overall audio strategy, I decided to introduce the sounds of human activities to showcase the patterns seen by the mating moths. However, I did not want to be overt. For the calling scenes, I explored Dr. Jesser’s idea of bar noises and selected a group, social soundtrack. The next sequences are backed with a crowd at a wedding. You can hear classical music and voices melding. For the first two points of insertion, I used applause from a wedding. It has cat-calling, yet I thought it was still in the spirit of matrimony. Throughout, I used actual moth wing flapping sounds. The main mating sequences feature piano music written and performed by my husband, Steven Anthony Lombardi. I asked him to think, “I am madly in love with you and I want to spend my whole life with you.” I timed crescendos in the video footage with crescendos in the music. For the unsuccessful male scenes, I used only flapping noises. I wanted to build tension and focus on what wasn’t working. Wanting a positive ending, I reintroduced the piano music and added the heartbeat of a fetus, comparing newly laid eggs to the potential of a fetus for the final sequences.

Overall, I am satisfied with the resulting video. I enjoyed spending time with the footage and thinking deeply about the moth/human connection.

*The Game of Life* (figure 10)

In the work *The Game of Life*, I stepped away from the sadness of death and the emphasis on mating that other pieces examined in Fall 2010 to look at the life cycle of the moth in its entirety. I use three cardboard playhouses, three channel projection and handmade puppets to bring this idea together.

On one house projected silkworms are hatching, eating and growing appearing at an enormous scale hundreds of times their actual size. On the second house full grown larvae spinning and new adults emerging are projected. The third house holds on its surface the imagery of female moths calling, couples mating and females laying eggs.
I used a variety of fabrics and paper to make four hand-in-mouth style puppets, consulting with professional puppeteer, Nancy Lacher. I wanted to make the insects assessable to a broader audience and to have visual aids to answer the many questions the work was bringing about. I added anatomical details such as breathing holes, eye spots, false legs, true legs, antennae and eggs.

The moth and silkworm puppets in this installation invite the audience to play and to direct their own moth drama. This powerful tool brings humans into the space of another species and works to develop compassion and understanding for the insects.

*Caterpillar House* (figures 11-13)

This project is a continuation of the *Untitled House with projection* that I have been constructing in collaboration with the insects since last June. The piece draws in viewers with light and drama as the moths’ story unfolds in the space beneath the stairwell projected on a tiny paper screen. This 3D object offers beauty in its dilapidation. Max Kozloff’s article “A Planet of Relics” in January 2011 *Art in America* reminded me deeply of how I think about this space, “Whatever the jobs they do, most buildings embody cultural forms, chafed through time. The built environment is a patchwork of styled presences, aging on undetermined schedules of decay, just like people.” (53). In this work I invoke a sense of history. The structure is built from wood that was once a porch swing. Subsequent broods of silkworms and moths that have lived within the object each add layers of evidence. The implication is that many lives have come before and many more will come. Also included is a nod of acceptance. Insects are allowed to stay in the spot where they expired. Silk exists in the areas where it was placed by many generations of silkworms. Alive or dead, new or old, each element has the same privilege to be a part of the house.

The new development for the thesis exhibition was live insects. While this was a part of my vision for the piece, time did not allow me to raise silkworms in preparation. My desire to have living silkworms in the house reestablished collaboration with the Columbus School for Girls.
(CSG), bringing that relationship full circle. The studio art teacher for the Program for Young Children (PYC) made the gracious offer to raise silkworms in the classroom setting with the youngest girls. The children are three and four years old and have been studying sculpture all school year, including visits to The Wexner Center (Six Solos), Hopkins Hall Gallery (Gene Fraley), Columbus Museum of Art and looking at sculpture on their own campus. I presented to the children in their classroom on Wednesday, March 2, 2011 and delivered hundreds of eggs from cold storage. While discussing my work and thesis projects, the girls suggested the sculpture should be titled *Caterpillar House*.

The insects began to hatch in late March. Technology was used in the classroom to magnify the tiny eggs so that the girls and their teachers could see the eye lashed size caterpillars hatch from freckle sized eggs. I visited CSG again on Thursday, April 14, 2011 to check in on the progress and see all that the girls had learned. I took along the puppets that I made for *Game of Life*, and used them as a teaching tool.

On Wednesday, April 20, 2011 twenty one students and four teachers visited the M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition on the second day it was open to the public to spend time with my work, tour the exhibit and perhaps most importantly to deliver the silkworms that now live in the piece at Urban Arts Space. This development brings the viewer in as an active observer, bridging the species gap through direct experience with “the other.”

*Understairs*  (figures 14-16)

This project combines several elements to create an installation based on my *Understairs* lithograph and the miniature under stairs spaces in *Moth House* and *Caterpillar House*. Human-scale stairs tempt gallery goers, though they are unable to climb them and the stairs end without leading anywhere. The area to explore becomes underneath.

This under stairs is delineated by a screen of mulberry paper on which the full life cycle of the insects is projected. Eggs hatch; silkworms eat and grow, spin and emerge transformed into
adult moths. Moths call, mate and lay eggs. Then the cycle repeats anew with a second set of footage creating a twenty-three minute loop, bringing the insects to the viewer in gigantic scale. The sounds of silkworms chomping leaves and spinning cocoons, silk moths flapping wings, is intermingled with the sounds of human domesticity. The T.V. plays almost imperceptibly. Piano music, a ticking clock, the sounds of dishes being washed and coffee being made are layered with the insect sounds, offered as a background, setting the scene. The sounds of the stairs being climbed and descended as well as a squeaking floor accompany the viewer as they peek underneath. An antique bench invites them to come in and stay a while.

Within the moth-themed wallpaper is another opportunity to meet the viewer with silkworms and moths in all stages of their development, as it is designed into the pattern. The process to create this began with an intaglio print with more than twenty chine colles of three kinds of Japanese papers printed onto warm Hannamule Copperplate paper. I then scanned the image at high resolution and digitally replicated the pattern. I used Photoshop and learned many new things as I went along. The resulting image is 10.5’ long and 8’ tall, digitally outputted through the local business Think Big Color. Here my education continued as I learned about color management as we painstakingly matched the digital print to the original. The resulting reusable wallpaper is by far the largest print I have ever “pulled”!
Chapter Four: Thesis Projects as Culmination

I do not feel that I am at the end point of this body of work or the investigation that drives it, but I do see my thesis projects as exhibited in the Urban Arts Space as a culmination of the major ideas and choices I have made as a graduate student/art maker in the seven quarters of my study.

While in the planning stage for the thesis exhibition, An American Childhood by Annie Dillard was suggested to me as a reference relating to the content of my work. I found in her words a wonderful kinship to the way I thought my thesis work should feel. Annie talks about instances in her early childhood where she is both brave and playful, toying with the line between fear and exhilaration, “Figuring it out was a long and forced ascent to the very rim of being, to the membrane of skin that both separated and connects the inner life and the outer world.” (21). I wanted to elicit this feeling within the viewer in both Caterpillar House and Understairs-somewhat of a reverse bait and switch. I felt the need to create works that beckoned close, careful examination while simultaneously arousing in trepidation. Caterpillar House is both sweet and scary (miniature brass beds filled with dead bugs and gaping holes in the architecture), known and unknowable (physical evidence of lives lived and also the mystery they represent), full of death and filled with life (lifeless moths, useless eggs and living caterpillars). As an
onlooker during the run of the show, I was able to spy the surprise of viewers who found living silkworms on a bed that combined human associations with life-sustaining mulberry leaves. Again, I ask the visitor to become a participant, discovering the unexpected within the gallery walls-beauty in decay, the wonder of life in a creeping bug.

In *Understairs*, I watched viewers gingerly approach and saw the installation invite the curious underneath. After the experience of being under the stairs, gallery-goers told me of their surprise in feeling comfort and calm instead of frightened or squeamish. I witnessed the delight of uncovering more as participants realize that certain elements of the work are only visible from underneath. The space contains residue of the insect lives lived as well as containing human ornamentation. Framed photos, small books, keepsakes and toys welcome the viewer to share in evidence of human domesticity. To quote Robert Pogue Harrison in *The Dominion of the Dead*, “If nothing else, a house is a place to keep books in. Books require storage places because they themselves store time. They are places where the past comes to meet us from out of the future…” (43). These words effectively capture my idea about populating the shelf underneath with items that are from my past and present that extend to represent the unfolding of time for each of us.

Though the *Understairs* installation, I brought together all the layers of content and meaning as seen in life itself. This technical culmination (from my most ambitious print to complex sound design) invited people into a space for reflection where they might grow in understanding of their place within a personal history and gain admiration for a very different species, helping them see a fresh point of view. I offer an incomplete space (stairs that are removed from the house that once required them) that still caters to our need for “home” as it cocoons the viewer in a comforting, domestic space where evidence of human and insect life connect.

As I conclude my final weeks as a graduate student, I anticipate that this work will continue to grow. I currently have silkworms living in *Caterpillar House* within all states (viable eggs, larvae, pupa within cocoons and adult moths). It is powerful to have multiple broods alive
simultaneously, allowing me to see just how different each part of the same life can be. Raising them is time consuming. I try to enjoy them as I document their brief lives, gathering photographs and video footage for undetermined future use.

I continue to work on Game of Life, hoping to advance my understanding as I build commentary about communities of both insects and people, examining coexistence. I imagine constructing more permanent “houses”, replacing the cardboard boxes, and wish to more fully resolve the role of technology in the piece.

And finally, I am developing a tactile book object to operate as an extension of my recent installation and video sculpture work. The concept remains the same; the creation of a book brings the art into the hands of the viewer. Deepening the relationship between installation art and books, this project combines the ephemeral nature of one (installation) with the enduring qualities of the other (books) allowing the experience of my work to continue even as the thesis exhibition relinquishes itself to memory.
References:


Bibliography:


Appendix: Images

Figure 1: *Moth House*, video sculpture

Figure 2: *Settled In*, 3 color lithograph
Figure 3: *Cicada House*, video sculpture

Figure 4: *Untitled (spinner with stairs)*, mixed media
Mulberry Leaves & Heroin

They need some
NOW
They need MORE

She’s spinning in the bedroom
Searching behind the stairs
Look through the window
You can’t go in the house

Lift them gently!
CAREFUL
It’s never going to change

Stuck in their own web
Well it might be
somebody else’s web
But their stuck

I’m afraid they’ll die there

Will they come out?
No. I don’t think
they want to change

Give them all I can
Feed them
Care for them
Frustrated. And so tired.

She keeps calling
It’s a chemical attraction
You can’t choose for them

They’re mated
They’ll stay together
Eggs aren’t fertile
Can’t reproduce

Horribly sad

I thought I was helping
I really want to
It looks like they’re dying

But it is so slow
Why so much suffering?
Climbing the walls
Seeking the right place

Right place? For what?
To make a safe home
To start over again

Lost. They won’t clean up
I think they’re suffocating
Should have left an opening
They’re so vulnerable

Overwhelmed. Fear.

Can’t care for themselves?
Do something?
Anything? No.

Just stay in the house all day
And demand to be cared for
They don’t want to be
that way

How much longer
Will it go on?
Hearts hurt

I only want things to be good For them
I tried to tell them
They can’t hear

They’re so hungry

Figure 5: Mulberry Leaves and Heroin, poem
Figure 6: Reliquary, mixed media assemblage with preserved silkworms

Figure 7: Moth House, cloaked (detail), assemblage
Figure 8: *Gendered Moth Boxes*, performance

Figure 9: *10 days to make it happen: A MATING STORY*, video still

Figure 10: *Game of Life* (detail), 3 channel video sculpture with puppets
Figure 11: *Caterpillar House* (with gallery views), video sculpture

Figure 12: *Caterpillar House* (detail)

Figure 13: *Caterpillar House* (detail)
Figure 14: *Understairs*, stone lithograph

Figure 15: *Untitled*, intaglio print for wallpaper
Figure 16: Understairs (with details and gallery views), installation