FANTASY AND SELF-FABRICATION
DROWNING IN DRESSES

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

By
Robin Kristen Clifford, B.F.A.

The Ohio State University
2000

Master's Examination Committee:
Professor Mary Jo Bole, Adviser
Professor Steven Thurston
Professor Pheoris West

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of Art
ABSTRACT

In search of power, love, and immortality, we try on different fantasies, shrouding ourselves in our desires. We create what we need to survive and often forget we have created it. I use the figure to visually explore the interplay between fantasy and self-fabrication by covering the figure with clothing that becomes a metaphor for fantasy. The figures are covered, supported, and consumed by their clothing. My work questions the efficacy of fantasy as a means of survival and invites the viewer to invade particular fantasies in order to re-evaluate the sacrifices made in the preservation of fantasy.
For Marina
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my Adviser Mary Jo Bole for her guidance and encouragement, and her willingness to discuss both my failures and my successes.

Thanks must also be given to Steven Thurston for constantly pushing me outside of my comfort zones, forcing me to acquire new skills to make myself comfortable again.

I thank Pheoris West for urging me to study the figure, and my studio-mate Bernadette Curran for her advice and friendship through these two years.

I wish also to acknowledge Von Allen, my undergraduate adviser, for her part in forming my love for clay and my desire for constant intellectual growth.

I am grateful also to my parents who have taught me the value of hard work and who give me constant love and support.

This research has been supported by The Ohio State University Fellowship program as well as the Edith Fergus-Gilmore Grant Fund.
VITA

2000.......................... Graduate Teaching Assistant
The Ohio State University

2000.......................... Edith Fergus Gilmore Grant Recipient

2000.......................... Materials Grant Recipient

1999.......................... Ohio State University Fellow

1998.......................... Ceramics 101 Instructor,
Brigham Young University

1998.......................... Orca Grant Recipient

1998.......................... Bachelor of Fine Arts
Brigham Young University

1997.......................... Award of Merit, Spring Salon

1997.......................... Brigham Young University Talent Award

1997.......................... Juror’s Choice, Annual Art Festival

1994.......................... Fashion Design Award Recipient
Brigham Young University Fashion Show

August 6, 1973.................. Born Pensacola, Florida

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

1. Show Me the Shoe (juried), St Louis Museum, St Louis MO, 2000.

4. Lydia (installation), Monkey’s Retreat, Columbus OH, 1999.
5. NCECA Student Show (juried), Fort Hayes Gallery, Columbus OH, 1999.
7. Orton Cone Box Show (juried), Travelling Exhibition, 1998-99.

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Art
Ceramics
Fashion Design
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INTRODUCTION

My grandma lives at 511 Chula Vista Avenue in "The Village", Lady Lake, Florida. I am tempted to go on listing as I would have as a child...Florida, in the United States, in North America, in the World...only I am not sure what world "The Village" is in. This planned community spreads itself out on a golf course--pastel and white vinyl sided houses clinging to each other like siamese twins separated at birth by concrete driveways painted to look like the yellow brick road. Each house has a carport large enough for one car and one golf cart. Every road in "The Village" broadens itself out for what looks like a bike lane, but is in fact a golf cart lane. These miniature lanes criss-cross from post office to pool, from grocery store and Wal-Mart to "The Village" center. They pass over bridges spanning the man made lakes--complete with one alligator each for authenticity--and of course they pass through the golf course itself. Everything anyone could possibly want is available right there in "The Village"--no walking or driving necessary. One may possibly have to leave The Village for doctor or dentist appointments, but these offices are right across the freeway, and there is a bridge arching high above all the traffic. The bridge is new and reliable but was constructed to look old as was the rest of the village center. The concrete
bridge is painted to look as if it were made of old crumbly stone with vines or cracks (I am not sure which they are meant to be) winding up the sides.

Every time I visit my grandma I feel as if I am stepping into someone else’s dream world where everything has been plasticcoated and preserved in an eternally quaint and crumbling state. I guess someone did have a dream of how the world should be, and they found a way to build it up around themselves. Now other people can buy into that dream and they call it “The Village”.

I don’t know why it is, but I have this urge to poke holes in everyone else’s scenery. We all seem to have our own set--our own stage and scenery; sometimes it is personal and sometimes it is shared with other people. We’ve all got these backdrops we carry around with us and I have the feeling that these painted pictures are covering over what we are really looking for. I guess that is why I am poking holes--the real thing must be behind there somewhere. Life is a heavy load and we’re constantly trying to ease the pain, but often we just complicate things.

Antoine de St. Exupery wrote the story of The Little Prince who searched all the planets and stars for the secret of life. On one planet he met a merchant that sold a pill to be taken once a week to alleviate the need to drink. The merchant told the prince that the pill could save everybody lots of time--“fifty-three minutes in every week”. The little prince asked “And what do I do with those fifty-three minutes?” The merchant replied “Anything you like...” and the
prince said that if he had an extra fifty-three minutes he would “walk at [his] leisure toward a fresh spring of water.” (p74) As we claim more and more baggage as trying to cover over our discomfort, our pains, our mortality, we displace and magnify our needs rather than fulfill them.

These two years in graduate school have made me feel as if I’ve been turned inside out—all my guts have been exposed and I’m just looking for a way to make it worth while to others. I have been evaluating human desire, human need, human be-ing, how we make ourselves, how we remake ourselves and the world around us, how we decide what we need, who we are, and where we want to go. I believe that our highest desires are to be loved and to somehow live loved forever. All the baggage we carry and the mistakes we make are our attempts to get these things without pain. We drown ourselves with the baggage we think we need to save ourselves. John Steinbeck, in his novel East of Eden, claims nearly the same, saying “in uncertainty I am certain that underneath their topmost layers of frailty men want to be good and want to be loved. Indeed, most of their vices are attempted shortcuts to love” (p414)

Now I need to back up and tell some stories of people I have known and things I have read. Stories are my favorite way to learn. Sometimes I am jealous of storytellers and I hope to be able to create as many pleasurable layers in my work as a good story can. This writing comes together not from any special research on my part but from things that float through my life. I tend to
relate everything that comes my way to the questions I grapple with daily. So first I want to introduce you to Marina who fluttered through my life about six years ago.
CHAPTER 1

MARINA: PRODUCING HERSELF

All I had heard of Marina was that she was an older woman trying to get out of Geneva, Switzerland; she needed help packing. I prepared myself for a little box hefting, rummaging, and taping. Marina lived in a large, bluish, x-shaped building just off the Livron bus stop, three flights up, behind a faux-oakwood-door. I heard shuffling after I knocked as hinges--body and door--slowly unfolded. The dark hallway refused to brighten as she opened her door. Years of sunless traffic had melted everything to black on black.

She invited me inside and closed the door with rustling and crunching. Plastic covered everything. Bags from Prix-Unique and Carre-Fourre tumbled over each other behind every door creating plastic towers that spilled themselves out onto the carpet, over the couch and bed into every corner, through the kitchen, under every bookshelf trinket, and into the windows darkening the sun. Looking through the plastic, I tried to gulp Marina down. She smiled, smudging the dimness with her bright pink lipsticked teeth. Her hand fluttered uneasily through the air and finally nested in her hair as she said
“Come in, dear.” Her hair was dyed blacker than the hallway--chalky black to the roots. It looked as if she had colored in patches of her scalp with permanent marker to match. SOS pads, like small wiglets, hid under thin piles of hair creating a stringy puffed blackness that reached down over her face and circled her eyes, interrupted only by deep white crevices where the eyeliner refused to go.

We packed one box; then she sat me down on the couch and unpacked three others to show me her life’s prizes. Marina sent me off after a couple of hours with a plastic bag full of broken new years candles “still good for burning” and a head full of broken stories.

I sat at the bus stop clutching my candles and wondered if I would, as promised, go back to watch Marina box and un-box her things. I stared at the latest bus-stop ad--a nubile torso stretched and wrapped with a gauzy red bow--and wondered at the desperate need for escape I felt in Marina’s presence.

But escape from what? Was it my own need or Marina’s need that I felt so strongly? What pushed Marina outside the world I believed myself to be in and into her own made up world? Was it possible that Marina’s desire to appear beautiful and young grew out of a fear that her age and physical appearance will prevent others from loving her? Looking at the bus-stop ad, I thought of all the products and promises--all the fantasies for sale and realized that it is not just Marina who daily recreates herself. We all want power, love,
beauty, success, pleasure, fulfillment--fast packaged to go, and almost everyone wants to sell it to us. The market has little problem convincing us that its products deliver. It advertises lifestyles, attractions, elixirs--we buy them; we believe them. Every dream we have seems to be for sale, and we wear these purchases with pride. We consume identities like products, pulling them off and putting new ones on as fast as they can be fabricated. These fantasy selves shape us like corsets, leaving us squeezed and limp--unable to move freely without them. We cling to these fantasies so that they mingle with reality until we have a difficult time distinguishing one from the other. Bits of fantasy strand themselves permanently in our perception of reality--they become our reality.

Marina wishes to be young, beautiful, and enticing. So she buys youth and coats her face with bottled beauty. She applies make-up and hair dye, covers withering shoulders with polyester silks and jewelry; she carries her memory in her eyes, effectively covering and erasing the present uncomfortable physical world. She eliminates what she does not like from her view by covering it with more acceptable things.

In a similar attempt to escape an aging body, the heroine’s grandmother in Bodily Harm, by Margaret Atwood, tells her granddaughter that she has lost her hands. “My hands, she said, I’ve left them somewhere and now I can’t find them. They’re right there I said. On the end of your arms. No, no, she said
 impatiently. Not those, those are no good anymore. My other hands, the ones I had before. The ones I touch things with" (p57). Believing that she has simply misplaced her hands as she would a pair of gloves allows the grandmother to believe that she still possesses youthful functioning hands. This belief eases the pain of her physical reality. It becomes a means of survival--a floating over the pains and sorrows of life.

Sigmund Freud, in Civilization and its Discontents, says that many of us just do not like this world so "build up in its stead another world in which its most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by others that are in conformity with one's own wishes" (p31). We then shape ourselves to live in these worlds. Many people, like Marina, spend a lot of energy trying to cover things up. Our lives become rather baroque as we add little decorations here and there to hide cracks and failure--our inevitable humanity. Our efforts are spent fantasizing rather than actively improving and changing. This flight from reality--this hiding--does cause change, but it is often an unanticipated and disgruntled, unsatisfying change; we become our hiding.
CHAPTER 2

THE POWER OF THE GLASS SLIPPER

Marina's theatrical reproduction of herself has been playing around in my mind for years and has finally wedged itself firmly--consciously--into my work. I first realized this interest in fantasy and self-fabrication through fantasy and escape when questioned as to the pertinence of the flouffy, impossible, fancifulness of my work. I had been making what I called "High Heeled Feet"--the lower half of the leg with the foot attached to some sort of outrageous pedestal-like shoe. Neither foot nor leg appeared quite believable; toes arched grasping in impossible directions, and legs bent coyly more than any ankle could allow. The feet clung to the fantastic shoes but pushed away at the same time. I began to extend shoe into foot by glazing parts of the foot to match the shoe. I hoped that confusing and redrawing the lines between one object and the other would show how the acting out of a desire to appear a certain way can change the reality of the way we are. (See figure 2.1)

Shoes have a great deal of fantasy associated with them. History reports mythological and actual transformations of the wearer into princess,
noblewoman, goddess. One Cinderella tale shows big-footed step sisters cutting off heel and toe to fit feet into the enchanting glass slipper. Each successively succeeds, riding away in the prince’s carriage until a crow calls out “Look back, look back, there’s blood on the track!” The prince takes each sister back, and keeps trying until he finds the right girl, magical as the slipper. The wicked sisters achieve a moment of their dreams by mutilating their feet.

Chinese women also suffered by shoes. They had their feet bound for centuries, breaking their arches and curling toes toward heels, in order to fit their feet into the small lotus slippers. This prevented them from walking without assistance. Having a wife with lotus feet, never able to wander far from the home, able to do nothing, was a symbol of wealth among Chinese men.

One of the wealthy King Louis of France had his personal cobbler design high-heeled shoes for him so that he could appear taller and statelier in court. Other people picked up on this so quickly that soon laws had to be passed limiting how high shoes could be. High heels persist to this day—though mostly for women—scrunching toes forward and arches up, pushing butts back and bosoms forward, creating a mincing walk and a general air of readiness.

As I thought about these historical blurbs and the feet I had made pushing against the shoes, rejecting the damaging fantasies (the shoes) but at the same time clinging to them, I began to realize that the form and function of the shoe could be an outward manifestation of interior desires—fantasy.
Having been in fashion and costume design for a number of years, the idea of apparel as a symbol of interior human events appealed to me. I had tried to expose the human fancy many times before, usually with the result of making a ceramic monster. In my undergraduate studies, I chose the simple solution of building large figures and cutting holes in them to make stages for symbolic objects. The figure became a platform for the decoration. Then, as I began graduate school, I tried to expose hidden desires by making figures with multiple heads and appendages. I also skewed perspective, making long, helpless limbs in attempts to represent desire to overcome an inner turmoil externally—a forced outward growth that rendered the figure even more helpless. All these things were seen by others simply to represent physical anomalies. The bizarre physicality of the bodies overwhelmed the emotional content of the pieces. Using clothing as a second skin—a revealing and concealing skin—which could announce physically the desires of the soul would allow the emotion to overcome the body symbolically and visually.

Realizing that clothing could be used as a metaphorical body extension caused me to think of the figure less as an object and more as a character—a persona. I began collecting ideas of fantasy and tried to think of ways I could dress figures in their individual fantasies. Over spring break 1999, I went to Florida and sat on the beach making lists of what people do to escape, what people fantasize will change their lives. I picked ten of these and made each
into a poem about a specific woman and her way of approaching or fleeing the world. (See Appendix A) While I wrote the poems, I looked through magazines for faces, gestures, and clothing that I recognized to be part of these ladies. I made collages of each woman, then photocopied them, drawing and marking over them. The drawings and poems helped to revise and complete each other. This became my main source material for the next year.

Originally I planned make the figures in clay and literally dress them. I tried a few figures this way, but fabric clothing gave them the air of mannequins or dolls. (See figure 2.2) This did not bother me at first because mannequins refer to the marketing of clothing which seems to be based on the belief that apparel can change your life and who you are as well as your appearance. This idea fit within the realm of fantasy that I had been exploring with the high-heeled feet. I found a Nordstrom’s ad that says “Reinvent the Glass Slipper--Reinvent Yourself”. (See figure 2.3) The advertisement creates in the viewer the desire to change herself, then prescribes the means to do it: buy new shoes. Having the figure become a mannequin would reflect the idea of fantasies for sale but would not address the issue of individuals being consumed by mass produced fantasy or their own personal fantasies. Generalization, or trading identifying bits of ourselves for mass produced identity in order to fit in with the cultural concept of what we should be, through product consumption is an important theme in fantasy and does serve to shape lives; but, escape by self-
generalization fills only a small corner of self-fabrication through fantasy.

Individually created fantasy shaping our beings as the glass slipper transformed and shaped Cinderella’s magical evening with the Prince (and subsequently the rest of her life) excites greater possibilities of visual expression of transformation through desire. Each person has his or her personal glass slipper, though it may take an entirely different form—horses, chocolates, jewels, travels, cars, houses, sex, pills. We infuse these things and the objects representing these things with the power to transform us. We begin to believe and trust in these objects. When we attach them to ourselves and become reliant upon them, we allow fantasy and reality to bite into each other.
CHAPTER 3

PACKAGING OURSELVES TOO TIGHT

We constantly seek ways to make our lives easier, less painful. Steinbeck, in *East of Eden*, suggests that culture is based on this desire. His narrator explains "A country seems to follow a pattern. First come the openers...when the rough edges are worn off the land, businessmen and lawyers come in...and finally comes culture, which is entertainment, relaxation, transport out of the pain of living. And culture can be on any level and is" (p217). Steinbeck's narrator here points towards Freud's idea that we organize ourselves in the search of greater happiness. We culture ourselves to forget our failures, to forget our mortality so that we can believe ourselves powerful, omnipotent. We gather ourselves into large groups hoping to gain power and security, then measure ourselves against others; the distance between our perception of ourselves and our perception of others becomes our dominant source of identity. We often package ourselves up to match others, to make ourselves fit in, to be like everyone else—in order to eliminate some of the pain of living.
Freud believes that we spend most of our lifetimes running from emptiness—searching for happiness that we will never find because “what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery...all the things with which we seek to protect ourselves against the threats that emanate from the sources of suffering are part of that very civilization” (p38). The packages we squeeze ourselves into, the samenesses with which we protect ourselves can erase parts of us. As we wrap ourselves together to displace our weakness, we give up freedom. According to Freud “Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security” (p73). This loss of individuality—the loss of agency—causes our unhappiness.

A friend of mine housed in New Albany just outside of Columbus. It was a large Edwardian style brick house matching all the neighboring houses—in fact almost touching the neighboring houses. Out back was a golf course and a pond made just large enough for the swan that swam there. I felt as if I was in a trap—like once I got in I would not be able to get out. All the furniture, TVs, all the stuff in the house seemed to press down on me, and I felt like I would get lost or disappear into it. Birkin, in DH Lawrence’s Women in Love, says “Houses and furniture and clothes, they are all terms of an old base world, a detestable society of man. And if you have a Tudor house and old, beautiful furniture, it is only the past perpetuated on top of you, horrible. And if you have a perfect modern house designed by Poiret, it is something else
perpetuated on top of you. It is all horrible. It is all possessions, possessions
bullying you into generalization” (p341).

Sitting in this Edwardian house, I felt Birkin was right--possessions can
become dead weights around our necks; they can begin to posses and determine
who we are. But, what amazed me more was that this was someone’s dream
house, stacked right on top of someone else’s dream house. It seemed so
different from my day to day life, yet I knew it was the same. I live in a block
building in one room, and every other room in the building is the same. Their
house was just a different block building with more scrolls and curly Q’s added
to it. It made me feel as if we don’t really get to choose ourselves--we only get
what is out there and we can’t even think of anything that is not there already. I
began to get the quirky feeling that I was living in the Truman Show where
Truman’s whole world was constructed for him. When he begins to suspect
that someone else is in control of his life, he tries to escape--he wants the power
to create himself. As he prepares to exit the world created for him, his producer
calls out that the real world will be too hard for him and promises that if
Truman stays he will always be kept safe. But is safety what we really want, and
is generalization the price we will pay for our safety? Is it possible to begin to
define ourselves outside of our surroundings, outside of our possessions?

This question leads me back to my grandma and “The Village” with its
ten restaurants all bearing different names and decor, but the same menu, and
the movie-set downtown where all buildings are built to look crumbly and old from the front, but if you look at them from the side you can see the bright red brand new brick. My grandma talks constantly about “The Village”, how life is safe inside it--there are no punk kids, no loud children or noisy young people. The retired people have banded together to build up their community, and have excluded everyone that doesn’t meet their qualifications. There are even designated pools for visitors. You have to be over thirty to go to the adult pool. They have decorated their village, made up the rules--they have created a world for themselves. I wonder about this situation; maybe it is truly freeing to my grandmother. To me it is stifling (only partially because I am not old enough for the adult pool so am relegated to the kiddie pool). Everything there is the same--there are a few cheap fronts covering over the sameness and dullness of it all. I wonder if this perfectly constructed world does not add to her loneliness--there are no punk kids--true---but there are no kids at all: no children, no young people, no families--only retired folks. How much do you sacrifice in the realization of your dream world? How often do we create our own unhappiness by trying to obtain our perfect happiness? Must the individual be warned to evaluate the effects of displacement of agency for an illusional feeling of security? Do our escapes often prove to be our jailers? This is the question that has become the focus of my work.
CHAPTER 4

A CHOCOLATE CAKE JAIL

At the NCECA 1999 clay conference, I saw a woman pushing a big round table loaded with used plates and napkins. From where I sat, it looked as if the woman was wearing the table and had eaten everything on it. This image rang in my head giving me a visual example of clothing as a body extension—a woman captured, supported, and nourished by a table of treats. Freud’s idea that man desires omnipotence—creates Gods who possess that omnipotence—and then creates “auxiliary organs” or technological devices which allow us something close to this omnipotence so that we become “prosthetic Gods” (p44), resonates with the idea of fantasy as clothing—a body extension—a fabricated and adopted protection. Felice, the newly named character surrounded and drowning in a chocolate cake dress, is the ultimate example of a character creating a fantasy whereby she needs no one but herself to survive forever. The woman wearing the cake dress—able eat the cakes on her dress—to partake of herself in order to renew herself—becomes her own savior; it is the fulfillment of the dream of autonomy.
Margaret Atwood writes in *Surfacing* "...anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ. The animals die that we might live, they are substitute people, hunters in the fall killing deer, that is Christ also. And we eat them out of cans or otherwise; we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life. Canned Spam, canned Jesus, even plants must be Christ. But we refuse to worship; the body worships with blood and muscle but the thing in the knob head will not, wills not to, the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks." (p141) The chocolate cake lady becomes her own savior by partaking of herself. What is the cost of this sacrifice? What do we accept as our saviors; what do we destroy in order to survive? It is a difficult thing to recognize; Atwood says here that we often refuse to see; we do not want to know because then we would have to be grateful and this seems a burdensome task. Ruth Benedict in *Patterns of Culture* states again and again that we can only truly free ourselves when we do recognize our saviors--we must recognize what we give up--what is sacrificed so that we can have what we have (p248). We must know what we do not allow to exist by the way we are living so that we can weigh the cost and choose our sacrifice.

Seeing this woman caught up in the table, I was struck again with the idea that we are easily held captive by escapes of our own creation. I thought of a book I had read--title long forgotten--that discussed eating as a replacement for love--the resulting fat as a barrier or protection against the buffeting of
relationships and as a ready excuse for failure. The image quickly developed into a woman drowning in a red velvet table covered with chocolate desserts and then further into a dress with chocolate cakes rising out of it and the woman eating it—eating her own dress. I began to see the table and the desserts as her protection, separating her from pain and suffering, but also as holding her captive and threatening to engulf her as she engulfs the desserts.

I wanted to be able to use this image in my work. Using the dress to overcome, obliterate, and mesh with parts of the figure seemed the best way to represent the sacrifice of self that can occur with every choice we make. The only way I could think to blur the line between the dress and the cakes—to use the dress as her support structure as well as her captor—was to make the entire thing out of clay. I abandoned the idea of making ceramic figures wearing fabric because the figure refused to be engulfed by the fabric clothing. There was no occasion for the clothing and the figure to mesh together so that one could not be separated from the other. The obvious boundaries between clay and fabric created the mannequin-like feeling that I disliked. Making the clothing in clay would allow me to blur the lines between clothing and figure to create an indivisible bond between them. It would give me the opportunity to visually explore the idea of fantasy overcoming the fantasizer.

The first piece I made with clay clothing was Lydia. She wore a long dress that hung to the floor while her feet and head extended parallel to the
ground so that she seemed to be levitating. This structure demanded a support
device and making the dress out of clay provided it. I displayed her in a
storefront window and surrounded her with erotic churches and black crows
crowding around the golden pears hanging from her floating feet. I had hoped
the window would give Lydia her own space (her own reality) that viewers
could look into easily, almost voyeuristically, but not enter.

Looking into the window, I realized that Lydia could exist only in that
window; if taken out, all the parts of her fantasy world could be separated or
rearranged because they were not truly connected to her. This bothered me
because it did not reflect the idea that a person's fantasy clings to them shaping
their world. I decided that each character needed to have her entire space
connected to her so that she could exist in her own fantasy in any setting; the
clothing of each needed to form her world—it needed to confine and define,
capture and become her.
CHAPTER 5

FILLING IN THE GAPS

Ruth Benedict believes that we only exist within cultures, and she writes in *Patterns of Culture* that each culture comes up with different ways to deal with human problems; people are never autonomous. She says it is naive to believe as Freud does that a person is restrained by his culture. People may have individual potential, but “culture provides the raw material of which the individual makes his life. If it is meager, the individual suffers; if it is rich the individual has the chance to rise to opportunity... No individual can arrive even at the threshold of his potentialities without a culture in which he participates” (p252-253). The individual cannot progress beyond or without his or her culture.

If our culture does indeed have meager offerings, how do we overcome our discontent; how do we fill up the blank spaces? If culture engulfs our individuality, how do we reassert ourselves? Though I have posited that fantasy can overcome us, can it also serve to fill in the gaps between ourselves and the world as created by our culture? Can individual fantasy eventually
serve to revise an entire culture? If so does this make fantasy a valid way of conquering day to day problems? Does fantasy become our support structure?

Friedrich Nietzsche, in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, postulates that there are two kinds of people—the strong and the weak. The strong kill and devour; the weak die and are eaten. He compares the strong to eagles and the weak to lambs. He says it is natural for eagles to eat lambs and also natural for lambs to not want to be eaten. The lamb’s only defense, since they are obviously the less physically powerful, is an “imaginary revenge” (p21). Nietzsche’s mythology shows the powerful inhabiting the physical world and the weak, in their desire to be powerful, creating illusory worlds where weakness is virtue—and virtue holds power. The strong take what they need to survive, and the weak invent what they need to survive; they live in fantasy. Like Freud, Nietzsche believes that we, in our weakness, fabricate worlds and identities to our own liking in attempts to relieve or avenge our suffering. This is how we fill in the gaps.

Freud does not believe that these fantasies can last—reality is too strong (p31). Fantasies collapse when they collide with social reality and cause insanity. Ruth Benedict, however, emphasizes that all of culture is human creation, indicating that people can only move from one fabricated world to another.
Nietzsche, Benedict, and Freud all agree that culture defines what constitutes an acceptable reality. Perhaps this is why Marina seems so fragile. Her illusions protect her as long as they fit in within cultural expectations. She must be sure to keep herself packaged tightly enough in societal charms so that no one scrapes away her colored veneers and polishes; so that no one can scrape down to her weakness, otherwise her world would crumble.

I can imagine Marina standing too close to that red-wrapped, bus-stop body so that it leans out of the ad, to pluck her up and swallow her down like an eagle swallowing a little lamb. Marina’s world, where she is queen of plastic bag castles and memories of her glory days, is her fragile lamb-like survival. Her illusion is her strength. Perhaps this is not quite the same illusion that Nietzsche discusses as Marina seems to imagine herself possessed of the characteristics he might attribute to the strong--beauty, glamour, charm--rather than creating her own morality wherein age and experience are to be held in honor above physical appearance. Marina was possibly once numbered among the strong but can no longer take what she wants, so, like the lamb, she must create to survive. She winds her fantasy tightly around and around so that nothing disturbing can penetrate it--so that in every direction she turns, she sees herself re-created.
CHAPTER 6

DROWNING IN DRESSES

Larger than life, Marina floats a few inches away from the wall, tacked to a suspended board by a few hundred decorative furniture nails, welcoming the viewer into my thesis show. Eyes closed, head tilted forward to receive an imaginary crown, arms lifted in ecstasy, Marina acts as ringmaster at a circus calling the attention of the audience to the marvels that will take place all around them. (See figure 6.1) The other characters scatter themselves about the room, each sealed in the vortex of her own fantasy, each performing her fantastic survival.

I do not know much about the circus; I only have visions of what it must be like. But as I was bringing my pieces into the space, I felt as if I were setting up small impermanent circus-like theaters of entertainment, over-decorated and gaudy with color and scrolls and puffs to delight the audience and to hide from those less careful observers the precariousness of the situation of these performers. Drawings hang freely from ornate ceramic mounts like banners advertising the feats of each woman. I did not originally intend to put the
drawings in the show. I did not want the audience to compare the drawings to the sculpture because I allowed myself to change my ideas while working on the figure three dimensionally. They seemed separate to me. But as I hung the drawings from the ceramic mounts, it occurred to me that the drawings acted as advertisements for the woman adding an additional layer of meaning rather than different meaning. The drawings accomplished some things I could not do in three dimensions. In the drawing *Someone New Moved into Martha's Dress*, I was able to make the figure fade ghost-like in and out of the wall paper background. I could do this because both the image and the background were on the same plane. Devising a way to do this sculpturally would be much more challenging. Working on paper also gave me the opportunity to make things that would be structurally impossible in clay because of gravity and physical balance.

Conversely, the sculptures accomplish things impossible in drawings. I tried to push the drawing into the viewers space by hanging them a few inches away from the wall and by making the heavy decorative mounts, but they still cannot occupy space the way a sculpture can. I decided that the drawings made most sense near the sculpture. Because they occupy a different space, they can be seen as program posters giving background information not obtainable in the actual performance or in this case the sculpted piece.
I used the drawings as a kind of guide or map in making the sculptures. Elise is the first piece I did this with. (See figure 6.2, see also figure 6.6) Because I build with coils and have to let the bottom of the sculpture firm up before building too high, it is impossible to see the entire sculpture at once until it is complete. Making the pieces the same size as the drawings allowed me to use the drawings as a markers, telling me where I was so that I would not deviate too far off course. The drawings gave me enough information to know where to place detail without anxiety about the final product, but also they left enough space for me to reinterpret and solve new problems as I built so that the pieces did not become merely three dimensional illustrations of the drawings. I believe my use of the drawings as a guide influenced my feeling that they should act as the same for the viewer.

Further guides and information on each character lay semi-hidden, layered up in an ornate ceramic box made to look vaguely like a small dressing table. I made a book specifically for each character. The fabrication process was similar to that of the collage drawings. I compiled all the information I had fabricated for each character—the poems, the drawings, the sculptures—and tried to figure out what the characters book of life would be made out of: what it would contain, how heavy it would be, how accessible, tactile, defensive, decorative, plain, or informative it would be. The desire and hesitation on the part of the viewer to pick up and look into the books echoes the voyeuristic
peering into the lives of the characters created by the entire show. The feeling is similar to the anxiety felt in watching a tight-rope walker. Eyes attach themselves to the bright costumes and the daring feats of the walker, but hands rise involuntarily at any slight swaying in order to quickly hide possible disaster from view.

The books feel personal and intimate. The handling of the books makes the character tactile and places her vulnerably into the viewers hands. Each book has a specific place within the box, but the viewer is free to misplace, possibly not even replace, the book.

Though the information about the characters contained in the books and drawings seems free floating and impermanent, I wanted the figures themselves to be trapped in their space as much as the fat lady at the circus seems to be trapped in herself and her act. Like the fat ladies body, the dresses become the costume and stage for my characters twisted survival acts; some of the dresses support and engulf the figure while others merely tether the figure to her space.

I tried a number of ways of locking the figure into her world. Perhaps the most evident transition from the previously mentioned window installation to contained piece is Martha. I think of this piece as a mini installation. Martha wears a dress with an extra head, and she floats in a closet designed expressly for her. (See figure 6.3) Martha’s silent shoes ride on plates stacked and toppling from the closet. The plates reach out of the boundaries placed on
Martha by the form of her closet. This piece does not use the structure of the
dress to separate and confine the character, but rather it mimics the window,
creating a space for the viewer to peer into. Martha’s dress does not bind her to
her space, but to herself. The dress with blank extra head confines her left arm,
leaving only a small space for her hand to reach through. The sleeve to the
blank head is also hooked around her left hand. The extra head is a place for
Martha to store all the selves she could be. The shoes also represent all the
paths she could take, but there are too many.

Like Martha, Elizabeth, in Life before Man by Atwood, changes herself
constantly to fit into her situation. She has programmed herself to be what other
people expect of her and to see what other people want to be. This has allowed
her to pass easily through life, until now. Her husband has left her, and she
awaits the visit and chastisement of her aunt who will blame Elizabeth for the
marriage failure. Elizabeth thinks “Most people do imitations; she herself has
been doing imitations for years. If there is some reason for it she can imitate a
wife, a mother, an employee, a dutiful relative. The secret is to discover what
the others are trying to imitate and then support them in their belief that they’ve
done it well. Or the opposite: I can see through you. But Auntie Muriel doesn’t
do imitations; either that or she is so completely an imitation that she has
become genuine. She is her surface. Elizabeth can’t see through her because
there is nothing and nowhere to see. She is opaque as a rock” (p217). Martha
and Auntie Muriel address the questions: can continual fabrication erase some core part of ourselves so that we become no more than surface? Are we in search only of power and avoidance of hurt? What do we gain by continual re-fabrication?

Freud says that we act out of fear of loss of love; we avoid and call bad whatever threatens us with the loss of love (p248). If this is the case, Elizabeth’s many selves are created in the hope of retaining love. In this she has become very calculating. When she describes her Aunt as being only surface, she describes herself also. She rips herself apart trying to be what other people want her to be and can no longer see who she is. This is also the case with Martha. The tremendousness of everything that could be silences her and she floats unable to be anything.

I believe this floating and disappearing to be the plight of many of my characters. The floating causes the character to feel a weight or anchor is necessary, only, sometimes the anchor refuses to drop off when the character is ready to move on. Felice, Julie, and Grace use their fantasies as anchors; consequently, their dresses are heavy, becoming a support, showcase and weight for the figure. Both Felice and Grace have dresses growing so large and squeezing so tight that they threaten to cause the figure to disappear. (See figures 6.4 and 6.5) Although the actual figures are small, their dresses seem pillowy and large giving the pieces important mass, something I was afraid
would be lost as I scaled down in size on my retreat from window installation. The smaller size removed some of the awkwardness of the figures and allowed me more time to model and change individual parts, but put them closer to the scale of figurines. The puffiness of the clothing surrounding the figures and the characters desperate attempts to remain afloat in their fantasy dresses gives them the energy to be confrontational and pulls them beyond the decorative role of the figurine. All of the figures and their stances are pulled together from mismatched pieces of idealized bodies that I gathered together into my character collages from magazine adds. The models point toes, raise pinki fingers, and contort their bodies to show off the clothing and sometimes imply a story. The elongation and contortion of the figure slides stylized into my sculptures from the collages. It is, however, always the fantasy (the dress) and the story behind the fantasy that is important, never the figure. For this reason I have allowed the figure to get smaller and smaller while the clothing gets bigger and bigger.

Though the pieces seemed pillowy and large, they required something to elevate them, and I was not satisfied with the idea of putting them on pedestals. A pedestal seems a cold and formidable barrier between object and viewer. It began to seem to me that the presentation needed just as much attention as the lady—it would, after all, comprise the figure's world. The entire area around the figure should seem to be there because of the figure—it should all be attached to
her. Each character seemed to need a slightly different solution so I began to let the relationship of the character with her world dictate her presentation. The characters began to create their space rather than having the space create the character. Though I still use pedestal like structures, they are integrated into the story and form of the characters. Felice resides in a chocolate cake dress atop a red velvet table covered with plates of cakes and candies left over from the opening. Grace presides in the middle of the room crushing down a piece of city skyline. Julie is caught traumatically in an elaborate four-horsed carousel. (See plate 6.5)

These pieces become seductive in their self-made prisons because of their decorative jewel-like qualities and because of their accessibility and resemblance to things we confront in every day life. The viewer is drawn in on an instantaneous level so that they take part in the fantasy with the character, and they are trapped before they realize that it contains something foreboding too. My intent is to reproduce the seductivity of fantasy in my pieces, to capture the viewer with sensuality, so that they share the plight of the figure and must re-evaluate their position in the world.

Surface treatment of the figures became very important to me as I realized my desires to draw the viewer in. Because I spent so long making each piece and had such specific desires for the surface, the pieces sat unglazed in my studio for a long time. I stared and stared at Grace, trying to think of a way to
make her surface as active and obsessive as her form. The dress so choked the figure (so much so that I could not envision any other color than blood-red for the exposed parts of Grace's arms), I did not want to risk flattening the piece with a static glaze. I tested a few bubbling glazes, but soon realized that the surface could not seem easy. I wanted a very deliberate, patterned beaded look—the only way to do it was to apply the glaze a drop at a time. (See figure 6.7) This process was consuming; I beaded for three weeks but could think of no other way to accomplish this effect. On Grace's cloudy, bubbly, fleshy dress, the glaze beads became rain-droplety, luminous and pimply. The beads make Grace's surface so tactile that the viewer cannot resist touching it. It is beautiful and disgusting at the same time.

Felice exploits similar relationship between disgust and delight. One of the smallest figures (about the size of a four layer cake), her dress explodes at the sides with puffs and pleats turning into cupcakes, cakes and candies. Felice sinks down in the middle of this chocolaty mas, holding a miniature eclair over her open mouth. Her other hand grasps at the cherry on top of a cake rising from the dress. Placed on the table with all the cakes meant to be eaten by the guests at the opening, Felice demands particular attention because the viewer is again placed in a situation similar to that of the character. The viewer eats rich cake while he or she watches Felice consuming and being consumed by her chocolate cake fantasy.
I went back to my show after the opening to take slides and found that someone had been eating the cakes and candies that I had left on Felice’s table. I went down a couple more times and found more food gone each time.

The space is a public lobby with large windows looking out onto High Street, a main street in downtown Columbus. Anyone might be coming in to eat. This tickles me. I enjoy that the work is in a public space, that it confronts people that may not ordinarily choose to go see it.

In the process of installing it, I had the opportunity to talk to several people that work in the office building about my work. A few people even came in from the street just to ask what was going on. One man asked me if I was an interior decorator. I felt as if this gave me the chance to enter into people’s everyday lives and expand their experience just a little. This is important to me because I often fall into regret that so much of my own life is consumed by my art, and I wonder if there is not some more useful thing I should be doing. Having the chance to talk to people and hear their reactions to the questions I have placed before them in visual form reassures me that I am not drowning myself in a make-believe world where no one else can participate.

I have had the greatest public response to Julie. (See figures 6.8 and 6.9) Her bright colors and the intricacy of her carousel parts attract people. She seems to be made of a million pieces all fitting together--she is made of a million pieces and there was such an elapse of time between her making and her
completion, that I forgot how the pieces went together. Putting Julie back together was a disaster. Some pieces warped and shifted so that I had to shim some parts up and grind others down. I never saw her completely together until my show. This was dangerous, but also exhilarating.

I liked being able to work on small parts that fit together to make something substantial. I like to be able to put my feet up and scratch away at something small, but I also like the motion and labor of body involved in making pieces close to my own size. Making in parts allows for both of these. It also allows for multiple firings on smaller parts that might prove damaging to the structure of larger pieces.

These small parts also allowed for integration of other materials. The base of the carousel rests on four caster wheels for ease of transport, implied motion, lift off the ground, and over all height. The lift adds to the notion that Julie is spinning out of control. The idea of a carousel is attractive, a richly decorated leisure device that spins your troubles away. But the carousel in this piece becomes a trap—Julie locks herself in eternal spinning. She is never able to move ahead but returns again and again to the same place. The poles that support the galloping horses and stabilize the shell-like carousel topped skirt also cage her legs. While it is the carousel that turns her round and round, she positions herself in a precarious way suggesting that she would topple over if
the shackling carousel was suddenly removed. Her carousel fantasy is like the corset; she can barely survive in it, but once it is stuck to her, she cannot survive without it.
CHAPTER 7

SAVING MARINA, SAVING OURSELVES

This show is the beginning of a long pursuit into the exploration of fantasy as a means of survival. I constantly receive new stimulation and ideas from the people I interact with on a daily basis. Sometimes this project seems to overtake my life, and the need to make the pieces more and more elaborate engulfs all my time. I often feel that I am teetering on the edge and would like to be able to find a way to back out a little and still keep my little circus full of fresh and dazzling performers.

Feeling myself becoming trapped in a dress of my own making, trying to weigh out the cost of my own decisions sends me back to the bus stop outside Marina's Geneva apartment and makes me wonder if she knows the cost of her fantasies but just can't back out. Our culture often fosters--possibly even engenders--our individual fantasies. Western culture prizes the nubile woman, so it provides a system for many to achieve this virtue. In my mind I stare again at the red-wrapped bus-stop ad body and think it may not be Marina's
eagle enemy but an institution that fosters her belief that she can purchase back her youth and beauty.

Benedict warns that we must assess the institutions of our society—"cast up their cost in terms of social capital, in terms of less desirable behavior traits they stimulate and in terms of human suffering and frustration. No social order can separate its virtues from the defects of its virtues." (p248) We must find out whether our desire for beauty springs from the industry that created the ad or if desires like Marina’s open up a space for the ad to exist. Then we can determine what we exchange for the pursuit of our desires—what behaviors our desires inspire. We can then recognize what we give up in the realization of our fantasies.

This can be difficult because we often forget what we have created. Our fabrications—our fantasies—leak from private places and manifest themselves outwardly, meshing over time with the physical world so that we can no longer extricate ourselves. We believe ourselves and appear, in some degree, to be our fantasies. Our fabricated worlds seem to be supported by everything we see. Las Casas, as quoted by Alexander Toderove in The Conquest of America, speaks of Columbus and his desire to find gold, saying "It is a wonder to see how, when a man greatly desires something and strongly attaches himself to it in his imagination, he has the impression at every moment that whatever he hears and sees argues in favor of that thing." (p21) Columbus wanted gold, so
he interpreted everything—even the warm weather—as an indication of its proximity.

Toderove also explains that Columbus was able to find things he believed in—such as dog headed people, mermaids, and Cyclops—because “he knows in advance what he will find; the concrete experience is there to illustrate a truth already possessed, not to be interrogated according to pre-established rules in order to seek the truth” (p17). Columbus avoids discovery or non-discovery of things disturbing to his worldview by interpreting and imagining all things to support the truth he believes himself to possess. He refuses to see what he does not want to see. If our fantasies can effectively blind us to the actual condition of things, how can we step out of them; how can we begin to think outside of what we believe to be real?

The peacock lady, another character in my show, blinds herself to everything that doesn’t fit in with the world as she wants it to be by putting doilies and bows over everything. She bends over at the waist sticking bright blue dress feathers into the air, but she has a twist of ostrich in her too as she shoves her head down in her lacy finery at the first sighting of something she doesn’t want to believe in. The peacock lady and Columbus both try to keep themselves safe in worlds of their own creation by refusing to look outside themselves.
Benedict denounces this inability to see outside ones creations as a fatal limitation in human adaptation. She says that man is no longer capable of adapting biologically, so must adapt with intelligence. We do not grow polar fleece when it gets cold; we learn to sew coats for ourselves. She warns that unchecked adaptations may have more damaging effects than good—they may cause our destruction (p14). If the peacock lady continues to bury her head in her finery, she may never see the approach of destruction. Benedict believes that we must rediscover and evaluate our creations in order to decide if they are the best solution for us. An anthropologist, she believes one way to do this is to study cultures outside our own (p245). By doing this we may determine what costumes we are wearing. Without this conscious knowledge, we cannot evaluate the success of our survival gear and we can not know how to get it off if it does not work.

Often we are born into costumes prepared for us by previous generations. This makes them doubly hard to remove because we feel as if the costume is our own skin. This is why continual searching and pushing against the boundaries of what we know is so important. If we merely add layers on top without digging down, we will never come to the center of ourselves. Unless, E.F. Schumacher says in his book Small is Beautiful, “a person has sorted out and coordinated his manifold urges, impulses, and desires, his strivings are likely to be confused, contradictory, and possibly self-destructive” (p95). But
society today seems to encourage packing more and more gear on—layering costume upon costume thinking that a few more tricks and gadgets to make ourselves happy, to make ourselves powerful.

Freud says that although we have partially realized our dream of omnipotence through our "prosthetic Godhood" or technological body extensions, we are not yet happy with our Godlike character. It is not complete because we can never achieve happiness through our own fabrications (p45). With all the modern scientific achievements, we have not succeeded in making ourselves happier, we have merely displaced our frustration—we still have problems with our prosthetic god-suits. We are not yet gods (39). We have not yet succeeded in truly saving ourselves. We continually shift around in our self-saving suits, but our attempts seem always to fail short because our attempts are always short cuts, always replacements.

My work for the past year has been to review some specific adaptations I have seen created and to analyze the costumes we put on and the person we become by wearing these costumes. I am trying determine the cause of our need to be and have more than what we are and the mishap our failed attempts cause. I believe I will always be in awe of the desperate and complicated solutions we come up with in dressing ourselves for survival. By putting revised fantasies of the people I meet on figures in the form of costumes I hope to give others the chance to review, judge, and evaluate the effects of fantasy
and escapism so that they will begin to recognize the choices they make and the sacrifices that necessarily attach themselves to those decisions.

Finally, placing my version of Marina at the head of my circus, I leave the real Marina to her ointments and solutions wondering if she is slowly destroying herself—wondering if the best I can do in this situation is to use her to see myself more clearly, or if I have some responsibility to warn her.

The bus comes, and I never go back.
CONCLUSION

I must feel some sense of guilt at abandoning Marina because I do keep going back to her in my thoughts.

John Irving in explaining how he became a writer tells the story of Piggy Sneed—a dirty trash collector who lived in a pig barn and suffered the taunts of all the neighborhood children. One day he burned up in that pig barn—everybody needed to know why he burned—so Irving made up the story. Now, Irving says that his job as a writer is to continually set fire to Sneed so that he can save him again and again.

Certainly I have no saving power, but I have to believe that somehow I make a difference by doing what I do. I guess I think maybe I can rescue Marina—or the bits of Marina in all of us—if I open her up, expose her, pull her apart and put her back together again and again. So I dedicate my thesis show—all my women drowning in their beautiful but dangerous fantasies—to Marina and to us all.
APPENDIX A, POEMS
Lydia

held her breath
till she fainted

when she was younger
now when things grow

too much
Lydia falls

asleep she lifts
into the air eyes

closed
so no one

can blame her
GRACE

NEVER MEANT TO SMASH FACES, SHE JUST NEEDED TO BE HIGHER.

EYE-SOCKETS MAKE GOOD HAND-HOLDS.

TALL ENOUGH NOW TO SEE EVERYTHING, GRACE PREFERENCES CLOUDS.
THE WASTELAND CRUSHED BELOW CHARGES HER.

SHE BLAMES THEM.
WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THEY FLOATED UP

AND FOUND NOTHING HERE?
Martha

Has been living without
Sound using
the toilet for thunder
and drumming fingers for rain

Someone new moved
into Martha's dress;
they hold hands warning
Each other

Not to do dishes and to let
feet go but the new girl
Won't let go
so they spin freezing

in tight knots
until Martha becomes a place
she's never been before.
Ruth

rolls tight
across tight-rope
letting pieces beat
sudden beats
and laughter

crash

Ruth hails down
on upward eyes
she leans
spreading hand
over hard
spots to practice
and weight the catch
Marina

tells herself it's for volume
but she's hiding
the steel wool in her hair

everything that chips
or sags
she wraps
tight away

from sharp edges
she scrapes dried egg
from a pan
fingernails rehearsing stories

in her kitchen cabinets
she murmurs queen
and tips her head forward
to receive the crown
Felice

Grips the side of the table
Judging the distance
To the center

The world is candy—
Sugary melting sex packaged
For last minute cash
Register pickup

She leans in
Slipping
If she can’t back out
If the wake closes tight
Around her
She’ll be lost
Gloria

Wears halos
through her body
to make it bright
so lines
disappear and
everything becomes one
thing like bandages she
moves in edges
white raveling where
water seeps
dust gathers
in missing corners

papers like birds
or notes sing
secret lifting
her piece
by piece she
moves
down gathering
dust
into feathers she
shines halos
west
Ida

thinks she’s disappearing she wears
her losses like leper’s bells
warning she’s alive and deadly
bits of her are falling off

She needs noise rubbing against
her to know where she
begins she shakes and rattles herself

against air looking
for something solid to float in
her to keep her arms
from haunting the sky
Elise

rides free and fast
and light like cloud
and everything untouchable
when night slips down
she pushes
against herself
to feel something
at the end of her skin
she moves
up
through layers
of ceiling and floor
breaking through
cold night
until she is
sky
Julie

This town smells like carnival
just above where you can reach
edges marked in chain link
so you can see through
but only get through
in pieces
two by two inches
or back at the gate
where your hand is stamped

The smell lifts
when the wind runs north to south
and people come out
deodorant bodies
spangled with promise--and Julie
wet like carnival
wanting north wind
APPENDIX B, ILLUSTRATIONS
Figure 2.1 High-Heeled Feet
Figure 2.2 Traveling Light
Figure 2.3 Nordstrom's Advertisement, Reinvent Yourself
Figure 6.1 Marina Scraping Eggs, Receiving Her Crown
Figure 6.2 Pushing Against the End of Skin
Figure 6.3 Someone New Moved into Martha’s Dress
Figure 6.4 Felice Slipping
Figure 6.5 Grace Prefers Clouds
Figure 6.6 Grace Prefers Clouds, with drawing
Figure 6.7 Grace Prefers Clouds, detail
Figure 6.8 Julie Wanting North Wind
Figure 6.9 Julie Wanting North Wind, detail
BIBLIOGRAPHY


