BEAUTY AND DECAY

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

By
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2005

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2005
ABSTRACT

My work is about humanity. It is about loss. It is about layers. It is about seeing. It is about experience. It is about innocence. It is about memory. It is about love. It is about creation. It is about fear. It is about mystery. It is about beauty and decay.

The pinhole images in "Beauty and Decay," encompass my attempt to understand my existence, past and the world around me. In the process of understanding, the weaving of experiences and memory created enigmatic imagery that invited interpretation and wonderment. By emotionally experiencing the layers, the details evoke a psychological snapshot. There is a sense of dream, time and memory, measures that reflect as an abstraction in these images. The slight blur of the image, subtle movement of the figure, low point of reference, ambiguous objects and the deteriorating organic edge blends with the realistic to form the surreal.
Dedicated to my Mother,
Frances A. Fahy
and
To the memory of my Dad,
James L. Fahy
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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VITA

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My work is about humanity. It is about loss. It is about layers. It is about seeing. It is about experience. It is about innocence. It is about memory. It is about love. It is about creation. It is about fear. It is about mystery. It is about beauty and decay.

The thesis exhibition represents my continued exploration of humanity through the combined attributes of beauty and decay, which have always been elements of my work. One doesn’t exist without the other “...Innocence and Experience, Attraction and Repulsion...these are the twin faces of the Janus of our desire.” Incapable of being disentangled or untied, beauty and decay are a perfect union of opposing principles.

As represented in Roman mythology, Janus is the son of the sun. With two heads that allow him to view east and west at once, Janus opens the year and provides the seasons as the keeper of the earth, sea, and sky. This myth suggests that dualities are often connected as one.

Another ancient myth that encompasses the marrying of opposites is the Greek Myth of Persephone. The myth focuses on the division of the seasons, the beauty and rebirth of the spring and the bitterness and decay of winter.
These myths mirror the dichotomy found within my images. The separate chapters of this thesis discuss the various components I explore in the creation of the pinhole images presented in the exhibition, *Beauty and Decay*.

Figure 1.2 - Beauty and Decay. Images 1-5 (left to right), Hopkins Hall Gallery, The Ohio State University
CHAPTER 2
MEMORY AND PLACE

The myths of Janus and Persephone encompass my fascination with the cycle of nature. Early in my life, within my family's wooded acreage, I collected natural objects to draw and explore.

Full of mysterious and ambiguous objects, this organic canopy provided a desirable space for isolation, creation and exploration. I realized early in my life the importance of being ensconced in discovery. I developed my aesthetic sense by examining the objects' textures, shapes, surfaces and tonalities. My appreciation of both the impermanence and the cycle of nature are deeply engrained into my sensibility.

Triggered by a loss, the collective fragments of memory provided a starting point for this body of work. After my father's death, I experienced great sorrow. With thoughts of mortality present, I found myself reminiscing of memories and experiences that

Figure 2.1, Beauty and Decay: Image 10, thumbnail

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included our land and family. I found myself drawn back to our woods. Returning with a nostalgic heart, I rediscovered my connection with the sensory experience of the place, it became my romantic creative inlet.

I enjoyed walking through the paths and observing the dramatic differences in the array of plants and trees, the blooming and alive contrasted to the dead wood and fallen leaves. The sounds of dried leaves crunching and the hidden twigs snapping beneath my feet, the unsynchronized beat of the occasional nut or branch falling to the ground and the mantra song of the crickets and birds encapsulates the language and place of my childhood.

The compressed layers of existence, whether through a memory or experience in my artwork are comparable to the striations of tree growth or layers of decay on a woodland floor. Our land allowed me the opportunity and place to reflect on the importance of the memory in my expression.
CHAPTER 3
EXHIBITION AND IMAGES

This section will discuss the image placement and introduce the images presented in the exhibition, Beauty and Decay.

My Thesis exhibition, Beauty and Decay in Hopkins Hall Gallery on the campus of The Ohio State University featured 13 pinhole images. Each image measuring: 30" x 40", 35"w x 45"h x 3"d and encased by a painted white, oak wooden frame. Two images hung in the lobby (figure 3.4) and two images on the left wall (figure 3.3). One image was hung on a floating wall approximately three quarters inside the gallery, facing the door. Six images were on the right wall (figure 3.5) and two images (figure 3.5) were positioned on the wall adjacent to the lobby (viewed by leaving or turning in gallery). The presentation was visually

Figure 3.1 – Beauty and Decay: signage

Figure 3.2 – Beauty and Decay: Gallery Layout
split on a diagonal, breaking the box shape while still maintaining a relationship and flow of the images. I previously conceived the layout of the images as a square configuration but I reconsidered in response to the shared exhibition space and the desire for work to be viewed as individual images.

Ideally, the exhibition of the images will be in a square configuration with additional space between each frame.

"...Pictures invite the eye not to rush along, but to rest a while and dwell with them in enjoyment of their revelation. ... Let the spirit of the pictures rule, and to arrange it so that the reader might enter into the pages at any turn he like"[2]

It was my intention while creating my images, that each image to be viewed as individual narratives of memory. The symbols of my existence combined in a narrative form. The above quote of Philosopher, Joseph Campbell encompasses my thoughts on the placement of the images in Beauty and Decay.
Figure 3.4 – Beauty and Decay: Images 10 – 11, (left to right) Lobby of Hopkins Hall Gallery, The Ohio State University

Figure 3.5 – Beauty and Decay: Images 3 – 9, (left to right) Hopkins Hall Gallery, The Ohio State University
The word “narrative” conjures up the telling of a story in sequence. In my work, I (re)
define narrative as layers of personal memories and experiences told through visual
images. The layers create an atmosphere rich for interpretation.

The inaccuracy of memory combined with the universally shared experience of
the human condition result in the creation of visual mythical narratives within each
image. The new arrangement of the images and the ambiguous imagery allows for the
condition of multiple interpretations. Multiple interpretations and comments are
discussed in Chapter 4, Interpretations.

My desire is that the viewer forms their own interpretation and connection it each
individual image. The individual experiences of the viewer will allow unique and
universal interpretations. I chose to hang the images in an intuitive sequence so that the
viewer’s own personal myth or narrative evolves.

The following pages, features the images presented in Beauty and Decay. These
miniature versions of the original framed images are also inkjet prints on Somerset
Velvet Radiant White Watercolor Paper.
Figure 3.6 – Beauty and Decay: Image 1
Figure 3.7 – Beauty and Decay: Image 2
Figure 3.8 – Beauty and Decay: Image 3
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Figure 3.18 – Beauty and Decay: Image 13
CHAPTER 4

INTERPRETATION

"Art lives through the imaginations of the people who are seeing it. Without that contact, there is no art." - Keith Haring

The following sections: Critical Context, Group and Student Interpretations include objective and subjective interpretations from art reviewers (critics) and college students. Both allow an intimate glimpse into the viewer's experiences.

CRITICAL CONTEXT:

In a critical context, most critics voiced an interest in the surreal and iconic imagery. Critics have touched on cinematic references with "recalls a little of both Alice in Wonderland and The Wizard of Oz".

Other descriptions include: "surreal and dreamy images", "blurred and mysterious, the image suggest a vision or dream" and

Figure 4.1 - Beauty and Decay:
Image 12, thumbnail
“Mary’s intimate studies of figures in rural surroundings usually exploit the slight motion of her models to create evocative and symbolic representations of feminine archetype.”

Figure 4.2 - Beauty and Decay: Hopkins Hall Gallery, The Ohio State University

GROUP INTERPRETATION

This section represents the impressions and interpretations obtained in the gallery from a number of people who were not trained artists or as informed about art. Most of the comments were dependent on prompting the viewer to explain how they understood the imagery.

Common responses were comparisons to movies or characters in films. The Blair Witch Project, the Ring, Wizard of Oz and the Never Ending Story were a few of the films mentioned. When asked why the comparison to certain films, the interpretive
comments and the viewer’s questions began. “Most of the films incorporated nature, woods and/or people blurred out. How did you create a blurred figure? These are bizarre, scary or weird. Is that inside a barn? She looks older but is she pregnant? Is that a dog? What is the figure sitting on? Are you lying on the ground when shooting these pictures? What is with the striped socks? Is it about the Wicked Witch of the East? The edge feels like a charred log. This reminds me of allergies.”

“I don’t have an art side of the brain,” commented a man in his mid 20’s. If I had not requested his response to the images, he would have quickly viewed the pictures without comment. He did not want to “work too hard,” so he dismissed a few of the images swiftly.

Most of the connections and interpretations were associated with personal experiences and popular culture. Many of our beliefs today are strongly media driven.

STUDENT INTERPRETATIONS

In the gallery, a mixed group of college students generously and enthusiastically interpreted the “Beauty and Decay” exhibition. At first glance, they questioned where to begin “is this a narrative? If so…” They decided that the start of the narrative would be the image was located at the furthest point from the entrance. (Figure 4.3)
The large-scale image hung facing the door hung on a small separate wall panel. The group discussed the images and then presented their interpretations. They began by describing the facts of the image and quickly moved on to the personal feelings or the implied meaning. *Beauty and Decay, Image 1,* consists of a girl that is facing forward with her arms flanking her side, her straight hair cascades over her shoulders onto a long sleeveless white gown. The slight blur of the gown creates a translucent glowing effect. Her presence is haunting and connotes an apparition or a ghost spirit.

The figure is isolated without any other human existence within the limited frame of the viewer’s gaze. Positioned at ground level, the point of view creates the illusion of the figure standing on the horizon line, which is approximately two-thirds from the bottom of the image. In the foreground, a stem down, upright oak leaf appears anchored by the neighboring leaves. The magnitude of the leaf dwarfs the figure by occupying the lower left quarter of the photograph. The oak leaf forms a visual barrier between the viewer and the miniaturized feminine figure and background. The isolated girl suggests the fleeting, reclamation of, or loss of innocence or life.

As they interpreted the additional images within the exhibition, they mentioned references to the dichotomy of life and death, seasons and fertility. The following comment alluded to the subject of reincarnation: “The bird pecking the earth, and then the flower blooming suggests the body returning to earth.” (Figure 3.17)

Another suggested approach was from the view of a child. By *Beauty and Decay,* Image 4’s, (Figure 3.9) low point of reference, the young figure sitting on the ground and that children also tend to remember experiences according to seasonal changes.
An abrupt change of emotion was felt when viewing the sequence of the gate, roses and mask images (Figures 3.11, 3.12 and 3.13). The three images were interpreted as doom, violence and danger. "Disturbing" was a common description. One student responded, "There is a sense of violence that is upsetting to me. The gate, rose and mask images are dark and unnerving. The scale is so large that it "feels in your face", forcing you to deal with the confrontation."

The gate image (figure 3.11) represented a boundary or a scary scenario for this student. There is a danger of venturing off the regular walking path, past a chained fence and into the woods. The viewer clearly sensed this danger. Viewed from the experience of being a child, the unknown exploration of going too far is both scary and exhilarating at the same time.

The interpretation of a sequential narrative appeared to come to a halt when the group entered the lobby to view two isolated images. They now questioned whether or not the exhibition was a narrative sequence. In the gallery, they were confident that the images were a cohesive narrative but in the lobby they began to read the exhibition as separate images. The sense of a narrative had initially been so strong, however they were now questioning it, reading the images individually became a difficult task for some members of the group.

Some felt that the reoccurring objects, the consistency of size, the frames and the minimal space between each image seem to link the certain images together. For others, the gallery space limited the visual resting space between each image and they felt that the close space forced them to relate the previous image to the next image.
Other comments discussed the disruption of reality. The slight blur of the image and the common organic edge treatments blended with the realistic to create the surreal. The combination challenged the viewer’s understanding of “what is going on.” There was a sense of time and memory, a (reflection) measure, an abstraction in the images for this student. The images were reminiscent and compared to ghosts-like or spirit images created in the language of cinema. The landscape had a familiar feeling yet the “eerie details” challenged the viewer’s understanding of the image. Most of the students agreed that an overall emotion was felt of “sadness or loss” when viewing “Beauty and Decay”.

Interpretation can be as diverse as the individuality of the observers. Personal memory and experience influence the viewer to read the works of art in both unique and universally shared ways. Works of art will be read in different ways at different times, effecting its context and according to the reader’s experience. There is no right interpretation. All interpretations are correct to each individual. If the viewer is engaged and interested in a work of art, then a good interpretation is one that makes sense to that viewer and satisfies their curiosity.

To some viewer’s, the exhibition of Beauty and Decay was interpreted as a narrative by means of a relationship, common threads or my visual sensibility. However, my intention is that the individual images stand-alone in a series of collaged memories and personal experiences.
CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY: PINHOLE, POLAROID AND DIGITAL PRINTS

The work in *Beauty and Decay* is both experimental yet traditional. The confluence of Pinhole photography, Polaroid film and digital printing are explored in my thesis exhibition, *Beauty and Decay*. The above three elements have also been utilized by numerous artists. However, there are unique and unpredictable (results) marks and possibilities yet to be discovered.

PINHOLE

I have been creating images with pinhole cameras for over a decade. Using a handmade camera box and a pinhole aperture is photography at its most primitive and experimental. The poetic images I derive from my pinhole cameras, while carefully composed, are often include educated guesswork. My typical exposures have durations of several minutes and are

Figure 5.1 - Beauty and Decay: Image 8, thumbnail

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determined by my using a combination of exposure meter readings, experience and intuition.

Pinhole photography offers an experimental, scientific and inexpensive option in photography. It lies in contrast to the expensive state-of-the-art photographic equipment available. I consider the use of my pinhole camera an important tool in my creative process.

A pinhole camera is a camera without a lens. In my case, the pinhole camera is a light-tight wooden box. The light that produces the image passes through a very small opening about the size of a pinhole, hence the name. In order to produce a reasonably clear image, the pinhole aperture has to be .02 inches or less. I use my hand or black tape as the shutter, allowing passage or blocking of the light to expose the film. Pinhole cameras require much longer exposure times than conventional cameras because of the small aperture. Exposure times can range from seconds to hours registering the subject's movements or the remnants of the wind.

The depth of field in pinhole imagery is basically infinite. Objects in the background are as sharp or blurry as those in the foreground giving the image a biting sense of "...romanticism bordering on the surreal."
The slight blur of the image, subtle movement of the figure, the low point of reference, ambiguous objects and the deteriorating organic edge blends with the realistic to form the surreal.

POLAROID

My film of choice is 4x5 inch, Type 55-Polaroid. This film provides a positive print and a film negative. Without the aid of a viewfinder on the camera, the advantage of using Polaroid film is that it provides an instant result. There is immediate feedback of the exposure and composition.

Polaroid film can be experimental and often unpredictable. I chose this film exactly for these qualities. In my images, solarization occurs by subjecting the Polaroid negatives to long exposures (reciprocity) and a diluted or weak clearing agent used in the daylight. The positive-negative glowing effect of solarization creates a visual deterioration on the negative. This adds to the essence of decay.

Although the Polaroid’s mechanical marks (dot pattern) at the top and edge of the image embrace my interest in texture, pattern and mark making, it also represents that the image is full frame without cropping.
The outside edge of the Polaroid's negative is also unpredictable. The organic
dge that surrounds my image is reminiscent of the marks of daguerreotypes (figure 5.6)
or the silver gelatin prints I produced in the darkroom. I had purposely filed out an
cmarger negative carrier to allow light to pass around the image area of the negative
creating an organic black edge surrounding my full
frame image. (figure 5.5)

The use of the black edge has historic
precedence. Daguerreotype photographers such as, John
Plumbe (figure 5.6) used this method. The use of the outer
frame implies that no cropping has occurred.

In this digital age, it is common knowledge
photographic images can be altered and
manipulated. The inclusion of the Polaroid marks
around my images, indicate that these images are
unaltered. My images presented in "Beauty and
Decay" are full frame without any digital
manipulation. All images were created at the time of
exposure.

DIGITAL PRINTS

In contrast to the primitive structure and low technology of the pinhole camera,
the inkjet print is at the opposite extreme, the peak of current technology.
Introduced in the late 1980's, "Giclée" inkjet printing process was an output for the reproductions of artworks. Inkjet printing currently sets the standard in digital photography printing technology. In fact, the process itself has come to connote an archival digital print of the highest quality.

All of the prints included in the "Beauty and Decay" exhibition are Inkjet prints. The decision to switch from the wet process of the darkroom to digital printing was timely. Concerned with the hazards of my over exposure to photographic darkroom chemicals, I switched to digital printing when it became a viable archival option for the final print.

The Polaroid negatives are first scanned into a high-resolution digital file and then printed with a 7-color Epson 9600 ink jet printer using the finest quality inks currently available. I use UltraChrome inks exclusively because of their archival quality. My pinhole images are printed onto Somerset Velvet Radiant White Watercolor Paper. This textured, 100% cotton paper stock is the perfect choice for exceptional tonality typically found with traditional photographic papers. Unlike the traditional photographic paper, the textured surface of the watercolor paper and the warm toned inks add to the ethereal and surreal expression of memory in my artwork.

An advantage to digital printing is that once the digital file is completed, the output size and material can be altered with ease. The larger scale has a dramatic affect on the impact of the image. In contrast to a smaller print, the 35" x 45" print offers a larger than life feeling of objects and figures providing a stronger response in sensing the feeling of emotions.
CHAPTER 6
INSPIRATION AND INFLUENCES

I am no different than any artist who has come before me. Every experience influences my thoughts and in some cases inspire. In this chapter, I’ve included a few examples of interests and artists that have in some way influenced or share my aesthetic of beauty and decay.

"A work of art can of course be an intended projection of a myth which is already present in the collective imagination."98

MYTHOLOGY

Mythology is an inspiration for my artwork. A prime example of this influence is the myth of Persephone. This myth focuses on the division of the seasons, the beauty and rebirth of the spring, and the bitterness and decay of winter.

Persephone is the beautiful daughter of Demeter, the Goddess of the harvest10. Hades, the lord of the Underworld11, abducted Persephone and took her to his underworld.
Persephone eventually came to love Hades.

Demeter, her mother, consumed with rage and sorrow, created bitter cold and blustering wind conditions affecting the earth's inhabitants. She demanded that unless Persephone was returned to her side, the earth would perish in an eternal winter.

A compromise between Hades and Demeter was reached. The agreement was that Persephone would spend the coldest part of the year with her husband, Hades, underground and the rest of the year with Demeter above ground.

When Persephone is underground, the earth is afflicted by sorrow, but once Persephone returns from the underworld to the side of her mother, "Demeter pours forth the blessings of spring to welcome" Persephone's arrival home.  

ARCHETYPES

Archetypes add another layer and a source of inspiration in the creation of my images. The collective symbolism of feminine archetypes in my work merges with symbols of nature, spirituality and childhood memories. Archetype is defined as the first original model of which all other similar persons, objects, or concepts are merely derivative, copied, patterned, or emulated. Archetypes have been present since ancient
days "because they grow out of the nature of the psyche in its most rudimentary form…

These primordial images, once they have occurred in human history, are then passed on to future generations as "part of a collective inheritance"; a collective unconscious. …” (13)

Psychologist Carl Gustav Jung’s concept, the archetype, depicts the marrying of opposites. Four archetypes, made famous by Jung, consist of the self, the shadow, the anima and the animus. The self refers to the conscious, reflective personality of an individual. The shadow is a part of the unconscious mind that is mysterious and often disagreeable to the conscious mind. According to Jung, the anima is the feminine side of a man's personal unconscious. It can be identified as all the unconscious feminine psychological qualities that a man possesses. Jung also believed that every woman has an analogous animus within her psyche, this being a set of unconscious masculine attributes and potentials.
The symbol of the unconscious in Jungian psychology, The archetypal Mother manifests itself in myth as a host of archaic images. Commonly conceived of as a nature goddess, the recurrent theme of nature and motherly care go hand in hand. The mother goddess will consistently be associated with, if not in direct control of nature. Aspects of the mother goddess become deified as a fertility goddess or a goddess of war and destruction: nature is both the giver and destroyer of life. \(^{(12)}\)

ARTISTS

In this section, I have included a few examples of artists that have in part influenced, inspired or shared in my aesthetic of beauty and decay.

Georgia O’Keeffe’s close-up examination and appreciation of light, color, texture and pattern resonated in my aesthetic. I am fascinated with her examination of objects of nature in all phases whether it was a leaf, a bone or a flower at the peak of bloom. This examination echoes in my interest of natural objects and patterns, which are clearly visible in my artwork.

Figure 6.5 -
Georgia O’Keeffe, Pattern of Leaves, c. 1923, oil on canvas, 22 1/8 x 18 1/8”
In 1998, I participated and assisted in an experimental workshop lead by artist, Holly Roberts. This workshop explored process as a way to access the unconscious through oil painting and photographic mediums. This experimental way of applying and scraping paint on photographs offered an outlet for imagery deep within my psyche. The workshop also provided an environment rich in discussions of mythology and creative freedom.

"...By contrasting life and death we can gain a clarity, an idea of how to define life. We can gain some sense of how life begins at a point in time and how it continues, evolves, and then ends."  

Initially stunned by the complex and horrific tableaus of Joel-Peter Witkin, I was unable to turn away from his imagery. I found myself returning and exploring Witkin’s unique mark making. The physical and seductive marks created by scratching the negatives and bleaching or toning selective areas of the prints are reminiscent of the decomposing surface of daguerreotypes (figure 5.6).

Witkin’s images evoked deep emotion, which embodies my ideal of art.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

"Observing the world with rigor and curiosity is an act both of art and of science. Artist scrutinize the world around them for its beauty, its contradictions, and its signs of human experience."  \(^{15}\)

The pinhole images in “Beauty and Decay,” encompass my attempt to understand the past and the world around me. In the process of understanding, the weaving of exploration, experiences and memory created enigmatic imagery that invited a variety of interpretations. The individual images represent a stand-alone narrative in a series of collaged memories and personal experiences. By redefining narrative as layers of existence, the details of the image evoke a psychological snapshot. There is a sense of dream, time and memory, measures that reflect as an abstraction in these images. The slight blur of the image, subtle movement of the figures, low point of reference, ambiguous objects and the deteriorating organic edge bleeds with the realistic to form the surreal.

The thesis exhibition represents my continued exploration of humanity through the combined attributes of beauty and decay, a dichotomy that has always been an element of my work. My desire is that the imagery will evoke a sense of wonderment and enhance the experience of beauty and decay, the perfect union.
ENDNOTES


2. Long, Charles, The dreams of Professor Campbell p.158


4. Starker, Melissa, Columbus Alive, Critical Review: Optic Nerve, 8/8/02

5. Yates, Christopher, Columbus Dispatch, Critical Review and Image: Media, messages run gamut yearly show, 8/13/02


7. Barrett, Terry, Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding, McGraw Hill, 2003 (including comments and course work from class interpretation, The Ohio State University, AE840 : Criticism, Aesthetics, & Education)


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*Dark Days: Mystery, Murder, Mayhem*, page 3, Fall 1997


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