Lessons from Intuition

by

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“Chase after truth like hell and you'll free yourself, even though you never touch its coat-tails.”

-Clarence Darrow (1857 - 1938)

HISTORY

When I was a very young child, I heard stories of my great grandmother. What a beautiful and smart woman she was. The only one to have graduated from college. How she laughed. Her ability to bring out the best in everyone. She saw a leprechaun once. Always full of superstition and home remedies. Grandma cries for her passing every December 23rd, for the year 1961, the year there was no Christmas. Looking back, these are the only stories I was ever told about anyone in my family concerning someone who wasn’t present in my everyday life. And these stories stopped somewhere around eight years old. My artwork has become a quest to discover, or perhaps more accurately, invent, a history where those stories left off.

As a child I drew and colored like any other. From my pictures of mermaids, witches, and our kitchen, my mother believed I had art talent, which she told me came from her Uncle Joe. I don’t know anything else of Uncle Joe, but perhaps he had an interest in photography, because this is where my interests drifted to next. Due to a lack of facilities in my high school and the talk from my family that nearly all artists get (“How will you make money?”), photography went on hold for awhile. When I reached college my interests were rekindled. However, it took me three semesters and a letter
writing campaign to gain entrance into beginning photography, which was available to all students at Tulane University and highly favored by last semester business school students with seniority in registration.

I can only recently, though, look back at my earliest work from my these years and see how my interests tie into where my work is now. I have always been interested in mythology and religion since I can remember. My BFA thesis work involved self-portraits as various mythological characters, as well as the dawning importance of ritual in my life. The trip I made to Russia was my first experience out of the US, and forever changed my perception of identity. The million and one things I take for granted daily at home were great and bold in an environment where buying food is a challenge. I became humbled as I learned that much of my knowledge and habits, which I once considered “human” experience, was actually quite specifically an “American” experience. The visit stirred in me the importance of history, family and tradition, and made me question its apparent absence in my own family and culture. I now see my BFA thesis relying much on what I learned in Russia, as I explored the similarities in religion and myth, and questioning what gives one culture the right to deem another’s gods as mere folklore. I was not, however, strongly pushed to explore the reasoning behind my work, and graduate school was a rude, but necessary, awakening.

After my first year of graduate school, a summer trip to Italy reinforced some of this sense of acute awareness that had been introduced to me in Russia. The journal I kept there shows a more mature reverence for nature and order, and reveals the seeds that would later grow into the installation form that much of my work now takes. This was a welcome breakthrough, as in my first year at UGA, I found myself frustrated by both this
vague soup of ideas and emotions I had explored at Tulane to which I couldn’t give concrete form, as well as my desire to find a visual language to explore them beyond what I was finding with straight photography. The work I completed that year was a painful exploration of my new surroundings compounded with my seeming lack of connection to the fellow grads and faculty. Save for a handful of photos that explored a vague sense of spirituality and myth that pleased me (I clung fiercely to Joyce Tenneson’s “Light Warriors” for clarity), my first year did not yield much work that conveyed my ideas successfully, though the personal growth experience was laying the groundwork.
Zara and Russian Children
Silver gelatin print
1999
Self-Portrait as Medusa
Inkjet Print
1999
Orchid and Shadow
C-Print
2001
TURNING POINT

When September 11th occurred in the fall of my second year, I was a student in Carmon Colangelo’s graduate printmaking class. Already I was exploring the freedom of printmaking and mixed media that this brought, as letterpress, papermaking and bookmaking had given me much hope in the months before. But the event of 9/11 made me more concerned for the state of the American people’s attitude than the state of terror. The blind rage reaction. The irrational accusation of non-Caucasian Americans. The apparent merging of the word “Muslim” with “religious extremist”. My work had the potential to sway into a political realm, as I was exploring the differences between American culture and the cultures I was witnessing abroad. September 11th was a turning point for me in that I realized I could go on and on and on about the negative aspects of America in my art, complain and compare the worst of America to the best parts of anywhere else in the world; Wal-Mart is a common and easy target. But the other route would be to enact change in my own life, to bring ritual and tradition to places where there was none, to right the wrongs, starting with me, rather than constantly reciting the problem. The grass is always greener on the other side, but I decided it was important to look for some green grass in my own family and culture. The time had come to apply the highly aware, attentive to detail, open-minded attitude I have when abroad to my own daily life and activities.
Mandala II
Wood, found photo, transparency, wax, salt, twine
2001
Mandala IV
Wood, found photo, transparency, gold leaf, salt, wax, twine
2001
ARRIVAL

Bird watching was an activity influenced by my friend James Austin. When I first heard about him doing this, it struck me as a little odd, as I knew of no one who had such a hobby. I was intrigued, and had some conversations about it with him, in which he spoke of it being an activity of intense observation. As a gift he sent me a book of bird identifications with a note that read: “If bird watching is about observing things, it is important to know what you’re seeing. You’ll need this.”

Bird watching grew into a loaded activity for me. It was the gateway into discovery of all the other elements that are so influential in my work. By simply studying the robins in my yard or finches at my feeder, I grew increasingly aware of the environment around me. Of trees, of seasons, of times when certain fruits are harvested. In Athens, I have met more people who see all these things as central to their daily existence than anywhere else I have lived, which has proved incredibly nurturing. They speak of the kind of knowledge that could have been passed down to me through my elders if circumstances had been different. By getting in touch with this wisdom of cycles and living creatures, I feel as though I am reclaiming a personal history that may or may not have existed.

Though at this point, the truth of that history is irrelevant to me. I have often referred to my art as an invented family history, as I feel that I will never fully know the truth about what happened to make my family so splintered and secretive. This is one of the reasons I feel feminine issues entered into my work. For the first time I began to feel that while I will never know stories of individuals in my family, I can possibly relate to
their lives through the duties that the women performed as part of the era in which they lived. As I was completely raised by women, this appealed to me.

However, this also seemed risky to me, as I felt the work could draw connections to feminism, a topic in which I cannot claim much academic education. I have always shied away from this topic, only having seen the activities of feminist extremists, which was a turn-off for me. Also I am wary of glorifying women's roles too much, as this can be insensitive; they may have had no choice but to sew and cook. I however, was never told that my life was not capable of amounting to anything more than that. I have the luxury of seeing the positive side of their roles, and deal with confusion over how "women's work" was ever deemed as secondary to men's roles in the first place.

Still given this, I see a wonderful mysticism in women's traditional duties. A secret society. An elevation of mundane tasks to the realm of the supernatural. As early African slaves coming to America would mask their religion behind the façade of Catholic saints, I see the kitchen, cooking, as the curtain behind which hides alchemy, witchcraft, or any other esoteric power that involves being in tune with the earth and its workings. Mythology, pagan studies, world cultures and traditions, all these interests I have had since I was a teenager and even earlier, all come back to me now to be used in my own "spell work" of art.

I discovered a wealth of material connecting women to the act of making altars in this time, which had great power in taking my work to a successful place three-dimensionally. The book "Beautiful Necessity" by Kay Turner was highly influential in its exploration of the traditional uses of altars, their secular uses, and their ability to help women find peace and home within themselves by organizing the space and objects
around them. The concept of an altar seemed to be fitting in that it embodies familial and cultural history, supernatural recognition, and the necessity of ritual. Ritual is an event in which every action is imbued with an intent. It involves knowledge passed on through others, and demands awareness on behalf of all participants. This sense of awareness, of being open to all things around me both physical and invisible, is crucial to my work.
Our Birds
Wood, lasertran photos, mirrors, fabric, feather, jars, birdseed, bird nest
2002
Our Birds
Details
Morning Tea
Found wooden object, glass bottles, tea, silver gelatin print
2003
ART LESSONS

What I have learned about the art world since I have entered graduate school is immense. I feel I entered into this program more naïve than many, if not most. I do not regret the freedom I was given as an undergraduate, though it did leave me with much to learn when I arrived here.

As I near the end of my career here, I feel the most important lesson I have learned is to trust my intuition. As I have delved into material that makes less and less sense to my logical mind, something resonates deeply within me, and I know I am on the right track to expressing something crucial. One of the biggest challenges to overcome was the constant questioning of why I am doing something, the planning, and the discovery of at what point in art making that the questioning is most beneficial. When I first began lining up tiny grains of rice, I had no idea how to explain what it was that I was doing or why. Even now, I try not to question this too much. I have learned that people respond best to those pieces that are tapping into that unconscious place that urges me on to continue to create art, to the influences to which my response is visceral. In Michael Marshall’s graduate photo seminar, we discussed the concept of the visceral experience: the events and things to which we respond so positively that it manifests physically, perhaps in the pit of the stomach, or in one’s chest. I recognized the presence of those experiences in my life, but had a frustrating time trying to convey from where I physically felt the response. Seeing my final body of work, the best I can convey now as to where this place is would be my blood.

Photography as a medium has proved for me to be challenging in satisfying
the abstract quality of some of my pieces. Photography by nature always has a reference point. We do not discuss the physical photograph, for its paper and silver, as a piece of art. As I have longed to make art objects, I have come to the realization that there is a difference between an artist and a photographer. My trip to Ghana the summer before my third year involved me being a photographer. I was intimidated by this role at first, as it would present photo opportunities that were very different from the way I use photography. However when I arrived in Ghana, I was completely enveloped, I shot more film in one month than I had in possibly the entire year before. I don’t feel that I was taking simple snapshots, I feel I was an artist functioning as a photographer, but in my mind, the work I did there and the work I do in my studio are incredibly separate things. I immensely enjoyed the whole time spent and the photos that resulted from that experience, but I do not feel I have completed the process of artmaking until I have introduced the photographs into a bigger environment, as in “Our Birds” or “Stories I”. This is not to say I have lost all appreciation for straight photography as an art form; for my own personal art making process, I get little satisfaction from it. Even in the “Spells to Heal the Past” series, the darkroom manipulation and in particular, the scratching of the emulsion, for me, turns the pieces into objects rather than images on paper.

For all these reasons, I am a proponent of dropping the concept of one as a “photographer”, a “painter”, a “sculptor”. I have learned that some concepts need to take shape in a particular medium to find success. Limiting myself to one medium often limits my creativity, as well as further exploration of a concept. I still recognize the importance of being proficient in a particular medium above others, though I may utilize other media often. However, I will always call photography home.
Stories II
Wood, silver gelatin print, inkjet print, pumpkin seeds
2003
Stories III
Wood, silver gelatin print, rice
2003
FULL CIRCLE

My thoughts of my great grandmother being a force in my work is an extremely recent concept. I feel it is yet another one of those subliminal influences that I enjoy utilizing in my art. As facts about her life were just made known to me at the conclusion of this body of work, I consider whether I will play on these facts in my future work, or still invent and fantasize.

I think my great grandmother represents to me a vessel for all this knowledge I now seek, the knowledge that could have been passed down to me. As I constantly long to seek the positive in my daily life for my art, her memory comes to mind. I heard her spoken of by my mother as though she were utopia. It was the decisions that my grandmother made in her life that caused my family to be so distant with each other. Helene O'Brien is the perfection that existed before that fall.

Maybe I am telling stories psychically through her. Maybe she was a witch. Maybe she could have taught me how to make an apple pie, what trees are in my backyard, and the names of all my great-aunts and uncles. But I don't have all this factual knowledge, and I doubt I ever will. I refuse to be saddened by this however. I think my work will always have an element of the mysterious, as is my ancestry. We must make beautiful things out of what we are given, be that joy, wealth, sorrow, or mystery.
Psychic Inheritance
Shelf, mirror, wasps, glasses, onions, waster, fabric, lasertran, window
2003
Psychic Inheritance
Details
Spell to Heal the Past II
C-Print
2003
Bibliography


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Discography

Dead Can Dance. Toward the Within. 4AD Records, Cat. # 45769
Aion. 4AD Records, Cat. # 45575

Cocteau Twins. Treasure. 4AD Records, Cat. # 70412

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