Body, Process and the Other

by

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MFA, University of Georgia, 2004

Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art
of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Athens, Georgia
2004
[This world] is a living and self-creating mystery of which I am myself a part, to which I am myself my own unique door. 

-Thomas Merton

These works are images about the human condition, in its depths and in its heights, and they are personal expressions of self-discovery. The impulse to make the works is rooted in an acute awareness of my own existence as a physical being. The process of making them is informed by the use of my body as a means of creating images. Technological tools including video and printmaking media also inform the process. Each work develops through multiple stages as I make responsive decisions. These transitions serve as an analogy for what the work is ultimately about: transformation.

These are large-scale works on paper. The surfaces are built texturally by dragging gesso and paint across the paper and by sanding. I very slowly and loosely build up washes of color. Blues and blue-greens create a sense of atmosphere. I then apply glazes and pull paint across the surface with a squeegee. The black glazes in these works are especially rich, and they create a particular depth that is lustrous and enigmatic. Copper leaf is also used to delineate space in these works. This material oxidizes just as copper does, and I have developed a process of corroding an image on the metallic surface. I apply a clear acrylic resistant through a screen. When corrosive liquid is applied to the exposed areas of copper, the image emerges. These surfaces appear very much like the slabs of stone and buckling metal, but they also take on the illusion of having deep, atmospheric space.

Luminescent figures emerge from this space, and the compositions take on psychological connotations. In the two large works, life-size figures occupy rectilinear image fields. Self Outside of Self (figure 1) is a vertical composition with an overlapping picture plane. One figure stands while another figure crouches in an overlapping picture plane. This figure seems subordinate to the other in some way. It is in a state of collapse, and it is distorted beyond recognition. The space that this figure occupies seems to float on top of the other. I suggest that this is same figure presented simultaneously in different moments. If those moments overlap we get into some idea about omnipresence of action, existence and experience.

Procesional Soul (figure 2) is a horizontal image that is set in two major components with a four-inch gap between them. The lower area is blue and contains a prone figure that is so veiled in shadow that it is barely recognizable. A copper image field floats above this and contains another prone figure. The upper component contains the most recognizable figure. Its luminescent body, seemingly fragmented by shadow, is immersed in a rich black space. The serial positioning of the figures and the arrangement of components gives the sense that the upper figure is rising. The lower area becomes shadow, and the copper area serves as a
transition or bridge. The work has an architectural feel. It specifically references sarcophagi. The figures are entombed in rectangular spaces, which have stone-like surfaces.

*Duality/Shadow of Self* (figure 3) uses a diptych format and shows two silhouetted busts. There is a level of distortion in both that remove them from the physical environment. The images are the same head, but there is a tonal reversal that references film negatives. The relationship between the two takes on a mysterious feel, and it sets up a system of duality. There is a degree of change between the two. One is not truly opposite of the other, but there is some shift that occurs. One seems to recede in space while the other projects forward. The dichotomous relationship alludes to light and shadow, life and death. These polar relationships are manifested as conditions of the same entity.

The figures in these works are not totally photographic, nor are they rendered. However, they have gone through series of processes and alterations by which they are flattened and dissolved. There is diffusion of light and form. There is a sense of ethereality. The figuration is elusive because it is not tangible. The figures seem to recede into and emerge from darkness. They are in transition between coming and going. What remains visible is a lingering presence-- an aura. The idea of transformation, of change between states becomes central to the content of the work. This is true of the corroded copper areas, as they literally change over time. The material itself takes on the metaphor of alchemy. The copper surface has the absolute illusion of being sheet metal. It has been affected by a process through which an image has emerged. The change is transformative. The figure, made of transient material, is in a fleeting state of existence.

This moment of transformation has a religious connotation. It is an extreme experience that takes on profundity. I want the viewer to empathize with the possibility of that moment. The scale and materials are meant to engage the viewer on a physical level that will compel a sensational response. A viewer is able to identify with the life-size figures in these works. In *Self Outside of Self*, the standing figure almost mirrors the viewer. It offers itself as a model of humanity. In *Processional Soul* the dormant figures are more difficult to recognize. It is a demanding work with elusive figuration. The hands and feet are lost in shadow. The mass of torso, thighs, shoulder, and head are all that appear as present. However, the viewer is compelled to recognize the mass of a body.

These works are derived from several means. They began as physical performances, which are recorded by video. This footage is reexamined using super 8mm film and still photography. Working responsively with this source material, I use the computer to compose and alter images of the figure. I then translate the sources into print media: lithography and screenprinting. I use solvent transfers to diffuse the images. This reduces the amount of control I have over the outcome of the process. *Duality/Shadow of Self* was printed by stone lithography, and the larger works were
printed by plate lithography. Both of the larger works included screenprinting to facilitate the oxidation of the copper.

It is important for me to be physically engaged with the components of the work. In the initial stages of handling paper, I end up on the floor on my hands and knees sanding, building up texture, and pulling the squeegee across. It is gratifying, and I feel that is necessary for me as a maker. The importance of struggling with materials is obvious in the size of the lithograph plates I use. It takes sustained intensity and serious physical effort to process, roll and print three large litho plates. It is an exhausting but rewarding effort.

Retrospectively, how did I get toward making these images? The keystones in my development of methods of making things were creating body prints and working with film. In 2002 I was engaged in an intense exploration and distillation of myself as a maker. I wanted to get at a means of making things that was not predetermined and that did not carry a level of expectation toward the finishing of fine art. I wanted to make something significant for reasons other than enrollment in an academic art institution. I went through a series of experimental works. I set up a way to make marks with the motion of my body. My body is myself and the marks are part of myself. It is my absolute means with which to exist in this physical world and make things and make things happen. I also considered my natural actions of physical exercise—of renewal and growth. Hope and progress became central terms in my mental and physical construction of self. I set up a situation in the studio with a chin-up bar mounted to the wall with paper taped to the wall beneath (figure 4). I put wet medium on my body, grabbed the chin-up apparatus, pressed myself against the surface, and dragged myself upward. The smearing of pigment across the paper became the residue of that action. It is the mark of my body as a brush. An image-object comes out of the process. It is an artifact of that event. The appearance and connotations of it are far beyond anything I could have anticipated. It takes on a degree of profundity that I could never predetermine or plan. It seems to come from a desperate act to record a fleeting existence. One considers the Shroud of Turin as a reference.

Having discovered myself as a means of making things, I looked toward photo technology to continue that mode. I used video and super 8mm film to capture action that I could perform in a controlled environment, and from which I could work responsively. In the film Rise, Fall, Transform (figure 5), I am doing jumping jacks. I am jumping up and down; I am rising and falling. The use of the super 8mm film to re-photograph video footage allowed me to work quickly and responsively. The film is non-narrative and non-linear, and it sets up an abstract experience of the movement of time. In a key moment of the film, there is a relationship created between a static figure and a figure in motion. One is moving upward and another lies horizontal. The dormant figure is a negative reversal. It becomes a light-emitting thing and the rest is darkness. The figure emerges quite literally as a projection. The relationship between the figures alludes to duality and omnipresence of both a
willful life-force and death. The interrelationship between figures as components led directly to the compositions in the works discussed from the 2004 MFA Exhibition.

These works are about the change from the physical into something else. They are a recognition of death. I have to believe that beyond the moment of life is a transformation that is a beautiful experience. It is a possibility that we don't comprehend because our existence is rooted in physicality. We cannot empathize with that possibility in any tangible way. I have used images of myself and have allowed them to be changed toward an understanding of my existence: I am; I will have been.
Figure 1. *Self Outside of Self*. 85x53" 2003.
Figure 2. *Processional Soul*. 76x90" 2004.
Figure 3. *Duality/Shadow of Self*. 24x40" 2003.
Figure 4. Photo Composite of *Chinup Artifact*. 96x48" 2002.
Figure 5. *Rise, Fall, Transform.* Dim. Variable. 2003.