The Last Few Years: Graduate Research in the Visual Arts

by

Katherine R McGuire

B.A., New York University, 2003

A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art
of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
The Last Few Years: Graduate Research in the Visual Arts

by

Katherine R McGuire

Approved:

[Signature]
Melissa Harshman, Major Professor

[Signature]
Date
April 25, 2008
The Last Few Years: Graduate Research in the Visual Arts

Every reader finds himself. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument that makes it possible for the reader to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have seen in himself.

- Marcel Proust

Works of art are, in fact, artifacts: culturally produced objects. An effective art object (whether a print, sculpture, film or book) alters the perception of those who encounter it by expanding the possibilities of their reality, offering a new read on their world. It reflects and transforms both the individual that creates and encounters it. These experiences, collectively, work to write and shift culture.

Analogous to a writer, the visual artist relies upon a vernacular and looks to manipulate it to create new meaning. This manipulation, this re-presentation, of experience and thought through image and material choices affords a space for contemplation.

In a culture consumed by a philosophical imperative for progress, speed and ease of communication, art objects do not always communicate efficiently. Instead, the open-ended dialogue of visual art fosters expressive communication. This expressive communication is constituted by fluid translation of ideas and images and the absence of fixed meaning.

When I entered graduate school I was interested in critiquing the politics of viewership from a postmodernist framework. My first year of work focused on violence. I was fascinated by the transition from subject to object that takes place in the act of image-making. I wanted to explore “the violence to the sitter” that Francis Bacon illuminated in his work. I did so by investigating the mythologizing of historical murders over time.

The series Cycle (which comprised most of my first year of work) transcribed the stories that had grown up around the deaths of the Romanovs, Abraham Lincoln and Marie Antoinette. My goal was to beautify the stories of these deaths in a manner that mirrored the sublimation of the violence related to their deaths over the course of time with the retelling of these stories. The reality of their deaths was diminished with their cultural elevation to hero or, perhaps most horrifying, Disney character.

My research into these instances of historical violence was curtailed in June of 2006. At this time my perspective quite literally shifted when I was blinded in one eye following an injury related to an incident of domestic violence. I underwent multiple surgeries and treatments over the course of several months to restore my vision. My investigation of the narratives surrounding violence shifted from analytical to introspective. My methods of image-making also shifted from hand-drawn to photographically based.

This transition is evident in the series Revisions. The complete shift to photo-based work is seen in the series Broke. This shift reflects the importance I now place on how one sees (and is seen). Through the course of my surgeries and treatments the physical processes of vision, usually overlooked in art-making, were made very apparent. I had my shattered lens replaced by an artificial one. With this replacement, my left eye’s vision grew clearer but also took on more blue. The vitrectomy, removal of the liquid in the interior eye chamber, highlighted the sensitivity of
the retina to light. Smooth vision necessitates the flow of light through this liquid (the vitreous) to the rods and cones of the retina. When this is interrupted, images literally fragment and explode in the field of vision, imagine a film reel burning. The antibiotic injections into the vitreous that I received over the course of several months following these surgeries introduced an oil-based substance that swirls and distorts light, real time Dali-vision.

These distortions were always countered by the perfect vision of my right eye. This dramatic experience of vision compelled me to explore photographically based images. The distortion evident in my work is not just a direct translation of the flexibility the medium (its ability to be manipulated) but also an investigation of how we interact with photographic images and their supposedly direct translation of reality.

The verisimilitude of photography has been questioned since the birth of the medium. The manipulations made possible by the digitization of the medium have further enhanced these queries. However, the low-resolution quality of most images we interact with is what fascinates me. Our culture has become accustomed to low-resolution images. We accept degraded vision. In fact, a sentimental attachment to the grainy quality of television and computer screens permeates our society. The grain and pixilation I emphasize in my work explores the collective experience of degraded vision.

The medium of Printmaking is a tool to achieve a presentation of my investigations. I have emphasized screenprinting in my graduate research because it allows me to manipulate each layer of color that is used to make up the final photo-based image. It lets me filter and emphasize and affords me the ability to readily create a multiple. Furthermore, it allows me to print on a variety of materials and surfaces that support my conceptual investigations. The style I have developed with my photo-based screenprints does not hide the digital manipulation I employ and acknowledges the technical innovations mass-produced photography underwent in the 20th century. My prints are visually similar to offset lithographic techniques that were employed for magazine and print publications. I value these prints for their obviously mechanical production, the blatantness of filtering and processing. This evident processing emphasizes a removal from, a degradation of, the original.

Degradation and instability are also pertinent to my conceptual investigations within my work. My body of work is comprised of discrete series. Akin to a poet, I explore different ideas with thematic and stylistic threads carrying over from volume to volume. These "volumes" consistently explore the erosion and reconstitution of identity, how we see the world and the people around us.

The following pages discuss these investigations, through six of my series, in chronological order from the fall of 2006 through the spring of 2008. I have included a statement, photographic documentation and an Art Practice Map of each of the series to illuminate the vernacular I employ in my work. This vernacular is necessarily informed by my everyday experiences including consumption of literature, theory and art. The Art Practice Map streamlines my acknowledgement of multiple inspirations and influences.
Regarding Re-visions

Re-visions began as a series of sketches from the summer of 2006 that were made in reaction to the aforementioned injury. Up to that point, I relied heavily upon Postmodern discourse in my artistic agenda. Specifically, the shifting nature of understanding embodied by the dissection of a pertinent system of cultural logic: language. However, I felt compelled at this point to create work based upon my personal disillusionment. By re-contextualizing signs and symbols and mixing the hand-drawn with the photographic, I aimed to fabricate and replicate a mythological loss of innocence.

For me, a large part of this loss is a concretization, or formalization, of thinking. We need to believe symbols have a fixed meaning. Imagination and play (in the multiple meanings of the word) become secondary to logic. As Ferdinand de Saussure discussed in his linguistic works, the sign has an arbitrary relationship to the signified. The naming of the object (the creation of a linguistic reality) leads to a loss of knowledge of that which is named. The sign becomes a proxy and the essence of the object is simplified and lost. By codifying reality nuances are obscured. I needed this work to represent an open, flexible system of logic full of nuances that questions faith, truth and the ability to believe. A jar’s possibilities of containment are magical to a child, but become vastly limited with the practicalities of adulthood. I wanted to render these lost possibilities.

The original sketches for the children included telescope-heads and other literal mutations of vision. As I moved forward with the drawings I found myself able to explore limited sight, and its consequence, limited comprehension, more fully by eliminating a literal rendering. The open-ended system I was striving for motivated the creation of a non-linear narrative in the large canvas, and the extraction of elements that appear in the 36 panels. Signs and symbols within the work are repeated and re-contextualized (or de-contextualized) to yield new meanings/readings, to give the ability to see again. Allusions to “Dick and Jane” and fairy tales speak to the shared cultural construction of our youth. However, because these allusions are not consistent or didactic they leave space for the viewer to supply elements of their own personal history.

Re-visions is comprised of 36 screenprints on wood (23" x 23") and two canvases (15' x 5') executed in 2006.
Personal Experience
education
place
injury

Technical Research
digital photo processes
photo separations
woodworking
large scale screenprinting

Printmaking
screenprinting

Materials
wood
canvas
paper
upholstery tacks
process inks

Digital Photography
photo manipulation
incorporation of photo elements
into handdrawn positives

Haruki Murakami
Thomas Pynchon
Henry Darger
Dick and Jane
Saturday Evening Post
Art & Literature

Ferdinand de Saussure
Jacques Derrida
Jacques Lacan
Claude Levi-Strauss
Michel Foucault
Judith Butler

Theory

Re-visions Art Practice Map
Regarding *Broke*

*Broke* is the only purely autobiographical work I have made and, in all honesty, the most difficult for me to parse and discuss. The series summarizes my life from June of 2006 until February of 2007 when the series was completed and shown. It is a re-presentation of the documentation, both photographic and bureaucratic, of what I had been reduced to in the course of those months (at least to the law enforcement and medical fields).

The physical elements of the series, 30 screenprints on wood panels that are just slightly off of square, work to undermine the crisp, clean portraits that galleries generally present. The wood (luan) was the same type of wood I used to patch the broken window that was the cause of my injury. By printing on this wood, I was not contributing to the seemingly endless paper trail that had accumulated in relation to the incident and surgeries. The graininess of the images was enhanced by the grain of the wood itself and moved the images further still from their original state. The focus was shifted to making these documents into objects.

*Broke* was not made to malign any individual or institution but to distance myself from the events. This is not a series about blame or sympathy, but instead about guilt, complicity, endurance and a broken window. In other words, what it means to be broke(n).

---

*Broke* is comprised of 30 screenprints on wood (8.5" x 11") executed in 2007.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6525.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Emory Clinic, Inc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crackers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The look of it all (June-October)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advancing the Possibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personal Experience
education
place
monetary situation
hospitalization
injury
surgeries
insurance companies

Technical Research
4 color process on
varying wood grains

Digital Photography
self-portraitrature

Printmaking
Material
wood
4 color process
document simulation

Hannah Wilke
Art & Literature

Theory

Broke Art Practice Map
Regarding *Banditas (Palimpsests of Selves)*

I began *Banditas (Palimpsests of Selves)* while working on *Broke*. It makes my interior dialogue about identity and self-awareness at the time palpable. *Banditas (Palimpsests of Selves)* actively invites the viewer to participate and, in fact, author the piece. Starting from the simple premise that an individual only "sees" oneself through some sort of filter or reflection (mirror, photograph, etc.), I created 8 nylon masks of women I knew. I then re-photographed them wearing their own mask. These photos were then screenprinted onto wood panels and exhibited with the masks and a Polaroid camera. The viewer was invited to photograph himself wearing a mask and become a part of the collection of wood panel portraits. Each time the piece is shown it grows in size (there are now 84 portraits and 13 masks) while the masks and the quality of each new panel is degraded.

This process accentuates the instability of representation and identity. In literally wearing a layer of representation, the distortion of a static image becomes readily apparent. This, furthermore, speaks to the fact that the perception we have of ourselves is constantly in flux. We are forced to shift and adopt attitudes and expressions. So too, we often adopt attitudes and expressions of those we encounter. It translucently presents the history and layering of attributes that come to visually describe an individual. *Banditas (Palimpsests of Selves)* is a visual questioning of what masks we choose to wear and a rendering of the erosion of identity that ensues.

*14 Faces* serves as the video corollary to *Banditas (Palimpsests of Selves)*. With it I was able to integrate my print and video work. It allowed me to emphasize the performative aspects of *Banditas (Palimpsests of Selves)* which is indexical in nature. The video moves distortion and instability to the forefront by documenting what had been a fleeting experience for a limited audience in a gallery space.

*Banditas (Palimpsests of Selves)*, 2nd installation

*Banditas (Palimpsests of Selves)*, 3rd installation

*installation view of 14 Faces*

*Banditas (Palimpsests of Selves)* is comprised of screenprinted wood panels (5.5" x 8"), screenprinted nylon masks, and polaroids. Its installation size varies. The piece was installed 3 times throughout 2007. *14 Faces* was shown in 2008.
Personal Experience
- education
- place
- injury

Technical Research
- screenprinting on nylon
- FinalCut Pro

Printmaking
- the multiple screenprinting process
- 4 color process

Materials
- nylons
- polaroids
- tacking
- hooks
- electrical tape
- wood

Sculpture
- modification of prefabricated object

Video/Digital Photography
- 14 faces
- polaroids
- performance

Tony Oursler
Jenny Saville
Francis Bacon
Jeanne Dunning
David Lynch
Federico Fellini
Philip K. Dick
Thomas Pynchon

Art & Literature

Joseph Beuys
Jacques Derrida
Jacques Lacan
Jean Baudrillard
Michel Foucault

Theory

Banditas (Palimpsests of Selves) Art Practice Map
Regarding Mode

Mode was my first site-specific sculptural installation. The gallery, the Main Gallery at the University of Georgia's Lamar Dodd School of Art, functions as both an art space and corridor to classrooms. Mode is comprised of 30 cardboard school desks cut to scale. After I completed the construction of the usable desks I cut them down to pieces so they sink/rise out of the gallery floor. They reflect the industrial nature of the institution in which they were exhibited and the ultimate breakdown of recycled ideas and materials.

Mode was installed in 2007.
Personal Experience
education
place

Technical Research
sculpture
design

Printmaking
the multiple

Materials
cardboard

Sculpture
installation
design for mass production

Tara Donavan
Thomas Demand
Michel Gondry
Art & Literature

Joseph Beuys
Jacques Derrida
Jacques Lacan
Jean Baudrillard
Michel Foucault
Theory

Mode Art Practice Map
Regarding *Barrow Street*

*Barrow Street* further explores the material possibilities of cardboard and mines the implications of instability and mutability a recycled, re-usable containment material offers. I consider the piece akin to an experimental film. The installation consists of 105 prints on cardboard. These rows of "shingles" are approximately the same length (eighteen feet) as the width of my current home on Barrow Street. In reading the piece as successive images the "shingles" reference film frames. In fact, the look of the images is an investigation, in style and non-traditional narrative, of filmmakers whose aesthetics have strongly influenced me, namely Stan Brakhage, Betzy Bromberg, Wong Kar Wai and Federico Fellini.

The images themselves explore what is revealed and contained within an image. They feature four women and four homes whose architecture, both physical and psychological, are seemingly interchangeable. The content of *Barrow Street* speaks to the sublimation of individual experience through the universalizing qualities of storytelling. The viewer is ultimately forced to supply his own narrative.

*Barrow Street*, installation view, 18' x 5', 2008

*Barrow Street* is comprised of 105 screenprinted panels of cardboard (10" x 15"). It was completed in 2008.
Personal Experience
place
anonymity

Technical Research
4 color process on cardboard with glazing

Printmaking
screenprinting
variation in the multiple

Sculpture
installation

Material
cardboard

performance
self-portraits

Digital/Photography

Marcel Proust
Baroque
Rococo
Southern Gothic
Federico Fellini
Stan Brakhage
Betsy Bromberg
Pedro Almovodar
Wong Kar-wai
Jean-Luc Goddard
Marc Caro & Jean-Pierre Jeunet

Art & Literature

Theory

Barrow Street Art Practice Map
Regarding The Last Few Years

The Last Few Years serves as the culmination of my research at the University of Georgia. In creating an installation for the Georgia Museum of Art, I wanted to again critically examine the function of the space in which my work would be exhibited. I continued my work with cardboard, transforming a functional material into a precious one. Cardboard becomes a gilded birdcage.

The shapes are simplified derivations of historical cages found in paintings and photographs. The interior bottoms of the cages contain full color renderings of photographs I return to again and again, but rarely appear in my art due to personal attachment. (I am, at the end of my term here, revealing my personal sources of inspiration.) The undersides are tarnished versions of the interior prints. This tarnish is the embodiment of the degradation of meaning I feel occurs when translating an experience.

The cage, as a vessel, exemplifies the futility of guarding and coveting images/memories and the ratifying that is its consequence. As with access to a work of art in a museum, the gilded cage is a nod to accessibility and restriction. These cages are inaccessible and non-functional not only because of their cardboard constitution, but also because they lack doors. They are impossible containers. The shadows cast by the cages bear more realistic weight than the objects themselves. What they do contain is an activated space, a space for contemplation. Their arrangement (through vertical placement) restricts the viewer full access to the colored image. The full experience is dangled before the viewer but denied. Frustration and desire are emphasized.

The Last Few Years as displayed at the Georgia Museum of Art was comprised of 31 screenprinted cut cardboard cages completed in 2008.
Kudzu, 15" x 28" x 15"
Cigs, 15" x 26" x 15"
Confetti, 7.5" x 14" x 7.5"
Creche, 12.5" x 21" x 12.5"
Grads, 10.5" x 20" x 10.5"
Hat, 7.75" x 19" x 7.75"
Hotlegs, 12.5" x 21" x 12.5"
Lambs, 12.5" x 24" x 12.5"
Mirror, 7.75" x 17" x 7.75"
Model, 15" x 24.5" x 15"

Pillowfight, 19" x 32" x 19"

Rag, 15" x 26" x 15"

TV woman 12.5" x 27.5" x 12.5"

Swing, 16.5" x 32" x 16.5"

Unicycle, 7.25" x 15" x 7.25"

Unicycle (II), 7.25" x 23" x 7.25"

Wedding, 12.5" x 27" x 12.5"

Teeth, 12" x 24.5" x 12"
Alli B, 18.5" x 35" x 18.5"

Anna Kate, 12.5" x 23" x 12.5"

Barrow, 15" x 28" x 15"

BK, 10.75" x 18" x 10.75"

Bridge, 10.5" x 23" x 10.5"

Blinda, 12.5" x 24" x 12.5"
The Last Few Years Art Practice Map

Personal Experience
education
place

Technical Research
sculpture
design

Printmaking
the multiple

Materials
cardboard

Sculpture
installation
suspended objects
new framings

Art & Literature
Adia Millet
Francis Boucher
Marcel Proust
Haruki Murakami
Tara Donavan
Thomas Demand
Michel Gondry

Jacques Derrida
Jacques Lacan
Jean Baudrillard

Theory
The Years to Come

My graduate research afforded me the opportunity to internalize and re-interpret the theories that had interested me beforehand. In a sense, this time (the last three years) allowed me to find my voice, to begin to tell my story, or at least stories from my perspective. My experimentation with materials and the metaphors they allude to have led me from purely two-dimensional work to installations that involve sculpture and video. It is in this realm that I aim to continue investigating how one finds oneself (through another’s story or his own), and the frustration, desire and curiosity that leaves us constantly seeking.