Escape through Constraint

by

Emily Hadland

B.A. Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota 2002

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Emily Hadland

Approved:

Larry Millard 06/27/2010

Major Professor signed date

Carole Henry

Graduate Coordinator signed date
In an excerpt from the book *Re-Object*, Herbert Molderings uses a quote by the Mathematician Poincare that states, "Space is in reality amorphous and the things which are therein alone give it form. [...] We should therefore not have been able to construct space if we had not had an instrument to measure it; well, this instrument to which we relate everything, which we use instinctively, it is our own body." When re-evaluating my graduate work there is a commonality throughout work and its interaction to the body. Made to be worn, made from the measurements of my own body, and made for interaction.

In the beginning of my graduate career I was concerned with the body and its parts as the material that activates our lives. At this point the work was contemplating the body beyond constructs of the general social aesthetic, combined with ideas of advanced medical technology. The functions of organs are necessary for life; with medical advances these parts become replaceable with other humans' organs and with synthetic devises and materials. The medical terms transplant, transfusion, graft, prosthesis, and replacement have becoming more commonplace within our vernacular. In the first work I made at the University of Georgia I created parts of the body as accessory. The definition of accessory is something added to something to make it more useful. I was constructing the parts of the body to be something more useful, or possibly something that brings further awareness to what we carry with us and utilize daily. I saw this work as an exploration in the relationship between our bodies and our minds. The work *Leg Skin Suit* was created from flesh colored fabric sewn together with an
over-exaggerated amount of seams. Made with a strap to represent the skin being carried around, the suit illustrated part of the body's largest organ pieced together.

The next work that I made was a snowsuit titled *Pink*, and unlike the previous work I was no longer utilizing fabric to represent the skin. I was making the piece to be worn and to be viewed only for what it was- a reincarnation of snowsuits that I wore growing up in Minnesota- made from rip-stop nylon. The snowsuit is a protective barrier between the human body and the snow. I saw the piece as an extension of skin, or a synthetic addition that augments the ability to enjoy the environment toward which humans have a natural sense of curiosity and wonder. Along with the sheer fun of playing in snow I am attracted to the garish ridiculous nature of an adult wearing a neon pink snowsuit against the serenity of the winter landscape. It is through this attraction that I decided to present the piece as a photograph. The human form and landscape were an important aspect that needed to be included with the physical object; this made the medium of photography an ideal choice.

*Pink*, Photograph 2007

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In my second semester I began to further experiment with the material rip-stop nylon. Industrially, this type of fabric is used in many ways, including sails and hot air balloons. I wanted to utilize the material for what it was made for, and began sewing it and attaching it to pneumatic blowers and was able to give shape to the otherwise lifeless material. This was the beginning of my use of the balloon shape and using air as a sculpture medium. These pieces were not worn but offered the viewer a way to interact with the works by giving them access to the switch that controlled the air and by inviting them to sit on the sculpture. The act of inviting the viewer to participate with the work is important because it allows them the opportunity to use their imagination through physical interaction with the work.

Little Appliance. Steel Fabric, Hardware 2008

Wearable, Photograph 2008

In continuing to explore inflation as a means of giving form to sculpture I turned away from machines and moved to a more natural unpredictable source: the wind. I was interested in the act of harnessing something simple and overlooked like the wind with something that could
visually amplify it and physically exaggerate it. Not only am I using the body as a measurement of space, but also the fabric forms capture and create a visual dimension of space. The Wearable-Inflatables are sculptures that highlight how wind and air interacted with the human form. Similarly to the piece *Pink*, I considered the fabric of the Wearable pieces as a skin-like extension; attached to the body and therefore enhancing the experience of the interaction with the wind beyond the ability of human skin alone. The parachute/balloon-like extensions attach to the body at different points, thus giving an intensified interaction with wind, which might otherwise be unnoticed. In the Wearable series the physical object is important, but the capturing of the moment(s) through video and photography was what encapsulated the essence of the idea and feeling. These moments or more precisely “the moment” is a very important part of the work. Wearing the piece gives it shape, but the wind, which is unpredictable, further enhances the work. This unpredictable nature of these one of a kind fleeting interactions can be captured through film. It is the ability to capture the one moment where the parachute inflates tugging at the body, giving a feeling of flight and vulnerability, which gives a sense of thrill to the photograph. I was also interested in the idea of these sculptures as costume. Not only harnessing the wind and air as a method of exploring energy, but also the energy that costume can carry as a way of transforming and enhancing the everyday self.
At the same time that I was making the wearable series I made the piece *Edit*, a masking tape installation on a window. This idea was born from the visual game I would play by myself through masking out objects with other objects. This optical alignment, by closing one eye and lining up objects in the foreground to cover images far away was something that I wanted to make viewers do as well. I want people to interact with their surroundings on a deeper level than just recognizing objects by definition. Specifically the piece masked out man-made objects and materials leaving nature to be viewed in cut out pieces. The importance of the piece lies in its inclusion of an active viewer. In the photographs I am asking the viewer to use their imagination and nothing more, but through this work I am asking the viewer to physically participate. This continued interest in interactive work is important to me as a practice to give a balance to the work. By enabling the viewer to become an interpreter/participant, they become an active, integral part of the work; just as I have been an active, integral part by creating the work.

*Edit*, Masking tape, 2008

Up to this point the pieces had been inflated with machines and with wind, and now the use of breath as an inflating method became part of my
process. Experimenting with the source of air was important as a way of exploring multiple metaphors and their manifestations. When making the piece *emily*, I noticed a visual reference to thought-bubbles or balloons. The shape of a balloon, which I continue to use, also mimics illustrated thought-bubbles. I became aware of the interesting combination of the shape of a thought-bubble versus actual inflated balloon. It was an act of taking a two-dimensional image (comic thought-bubble) and making it three-dimensional through an actual inflatable sculpture (the name: *emily*). The three-dimensional object and figure then gets transformed back to the two-dimensional realm through photography, which further mimics comics or cartoons through their use of thought-bubbles. In the Photograph the foot of the photographer is seen and transforms viewer into a position of a voyeur. This along with the figure lying on the ground with their mouth bound conveys ideas of discomfort and dominance and most importantly constraint. Through the constraint the figure is still able to communicate thought and thus possibly able to mentally escape their constrained position.

*emily*, Photograph 2009
In making wearable sculpture I felt that it was somewhere between object-based art and fashion. I looked to Leigh Bowery and his career as a maker of wearable art and performance. While reading about him, I decided to make a costume inspired by his work. Using cotton fabric was a departure from the rip-stop nylon I had been using for my wearable pieces. I am interested in how Bowery’s *Looks* are activated by the body and transform the artist into the art. The photographer Fergus Greer took a series of photographs of Bowery in costume; this was my inspiration for my photographs *Tribute*. This piece began as an escape from my other work, but in this piece I realized that this work as well as the other worn pieces were about the escape and constraint simultaneously. The masked face is constrained physically, yet the premise of wearing the costume is to transform the self and thus escape the norm.
Throughout my graduate studies I made sewn sketches of a particular image I would describe as a balloon with legs. This image inspired the many incarnations of all of my inflatable pieces, and for my thesis show I wanted to create a three-dimensional version of this sketch. The piece was envisioned as a photograph similar to past works constructing objects to bring the sketch to life. The *Idleness of Escape* illustrates a desire for escape through flight, but an inability to leave the ground. There is a sort of entrapment of the figure by the balloon and the shackle on the leg.

*Sewn Sketch*, Canvas, Thread, Shellac 2009
The balloons are inflated using helium rather than just air, because of my desire to capture a more hot-air-balloon like quality. The main piece is still wearable like past work, although it fully covers the figure from the legs up. This form of constraint is by far the most restraining of the wearable work previously made. The location of the photograph plays into the idea of the viewer as voyeur through the position of the camera among the seats. Taking place in a theatre, a location where people go to mentally escape the limits of everyday life, echoes the ideas of escape and constraint.

The body is a tool that can be used to enhance experience, but also restrains us from understanding life beyond our physical abilities. It is the mind and imagination that offers us that escape.
Bibliography