2009

Run Stitch Remembrance

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RUN STITCH REMEMBRANCE

A Thesis Presented

by

LYNDSEY N. BALDWIN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2009

Art
RUN STITCH REMEMBRANCE

A Thesis Presented
by
LYNDSEY N. BALDWIN

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ABSTRACT

RUN STITCH REMEMBRANCE

MAY 2009

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M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Susan Jahoda

In an effort to process my grief associated with the death of my grandmother, I created a series of drawings, documenting my daily life in Massachusetts. This body of work constitutes my thesis. In total, I made one thousand and sixty one drawings, each undergoing a series of identical, repeated processes, which represent the number of days lived there. The simplicity, detail and sheer volume of drawings in the installation chronicles a relatable story through complex means. Creating the drawings was a methodical act of remembrance, the practice allowing quiet reflection on each day and its respective history. This body of work inhabits and portrays a space between experience and memory. It was a cathartic, private practice, which permits viewers only to witness the outcome, the installation; the legacy of time spent. Creating the work was a meditative, tactile way of both marking and processing time; time spent mourning the loss of my grandmother, accessing memories, and healing.
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"It seems that when a person experiences a trauma…it becomes locked into its own memory network as it was experienced – the images, physical sensations, tastes and smells, sounds and beliefs – as if frozen in time in the body and mind."1

I can remember clearly the first time I ever tied a bow successfully. I was sitting on the arm of my grandmother’s couch, in the backroom of her apartment, the same room she later taught me how to sew in, and it was as though my fingers made the loops fall into place magically. Earlier that day, she had shown me the old fashioned way to tie a bow, a way I had never seen before, a way I could watch and make sense of.

My maternal grandmother, Rose, was by far the most important person in my life. Though I grew up in a typical nuclear family, she was more a mother to me than my own. I have clearer memories of her apartment than I do my own parent’s house, where I lived. She taught me practical things, encouraged and supported me in a way my parents didn’t. My grandmother was extremely patient with me; if I couldn’t learn something one way, she would work out another method to help me understand.

Her illness and eventual death have haunted me since 2006. She died on a Tuesday, one hundred and twenty three days after I moved to Massachusetts from Ohio, to attend graduate school. Immediately following her death, I started to experience flashbacks, as if my memories of her were vividly living in the present. She was suffering from metastasized breast

cancer that had spread to her bones, spine, and lungs. By the time she felt sick enough to go to the doctor it was too late.

Traumatic memories become “locked in” to our nervous systems, creating a labyrinth-like network of associations relating to the incident. When this “locking in” occurs, we are both unable to access or process the memories. According to clinical psychologist, Laurel Parnell, “ordinary events seem to pass through us without leaving a mark. Traumatic events, however, often get trapped, and form a perpetual blockage. Like a broken record, they repeat themselves in our body-mind over and over again” (4).

In an effort to process my grief I created a series of drawings, documenting my daily life in Massachusetts. This body of work constitutes my thesis. In total, I made one thousand and sixty one drawings, each undergoing a series of identical, repeated processes, which represent the number of days lived there. The simplicity, detail and sheer volume of drawings in the installation chronicles a relatable story through complex means. Creating the drawings was a methodical act of remembrance, the practice allowing quiet reflection on each day and its respective history.
“It is generally agreed that no activity can be successfully pursued by an individual who is preoccupied – not rhetoric or liberal studies – since the mind when distracted absorbs nothing deeply, but rejects everything which is, so to speak, crammed into it. Living is the least important activity of the preoccupied mind; yet there is nothing which is harder to learn.”

I found myself questioning the physical location of my studio, and in turn, what I was doing there. The artist, Bruce Nauman, in contemplating his own studio practice, theorized, “if I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art. At this point, art becomes more of an activity and less of a product.” I realized that I could apply this philosophy to my own studio practice.

In September 2006 I began the daily practice of photographing myself in the studio. These images relied on three physical factors: my studio, my body and the computer, which I used as a camera. The process evolved into an obsessive, yet productive approach to circumventing my dilemma, that of being unable to produce in a setting where a particular kind of production was required. In addition, the routine and gradual accumulation of images led me to investigate the way artwork can emerge from a repeated act.

According to Barthes, “every photograph is a certificate of presence” (87). In the late 1800’s, people had their photographs taken holding pictures of absent loved ones, a sentiment marking both the person’s absence and continued presence in spirit. My daily self-

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portraits were taken while mourning the loss of my grandmother, within a space of emotional absence; therefore I was also “turning the experience of being photographed into an explicit act of remembrance” (Batchen, 12). The photographs satiated my desire to feel inspired, while producing metaphysical documentation, an instantaneous representation of my exterior, proof of my being there. It is rare for a photograph to accurately depict the true nature of the person being photographed. Barthes claimed,

“If the photographer cannot, either by lack of talent or bad luck, supply the transparent soul its bright shadow, the subject dies forever. I have been photographed a thousand times; but if these thousand photographs each have “missed” my air (and perhaps, after all, I have none?), my effigy will perpetuate (for the limited time the paper lasts) my identity, not my value.”

My photographs had performed ambivalent roles, portraying “the one I think I am, and the one I want others to think I am…”(Barthes, 13). They reflected the façade of my body, but disallowed access to my visceral being. I needed to apply this knowledge to a new practice, which would allow the act of documentation to become something from which I drew strength.

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“For Freud, when we lose a beloved person or object, we begin a process that, if successful, ends in our finding them again, within us.”

Throughout the practice of making this work, I have continued to refer to the artist Marina Abramovic. She makes performance-based artwork associated with pain, endurance tests and rituals involving the body. I am particularly interested in the way her work often involves the act of cleaning, with its “dual connotations of purification and erasure.”

Figure 1. Marina Abramovic, Cleaning the House, 2006.

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The studio photographs had recorded and preserved my presence, but lacked the mark of my hand. My inherent desire for process and manipulating materials needed more; thus, they became the vehicle from which the self-portrait drawings were extracted. The outline of my head and shoulders in the drawings represents a witness to the photographs, to my presence in the studio, and to the act of remembrance.

The tenuous nature of the embroidered-hair-contour-lines, which create each drawing, reflects the tension and fragility associated with trauma and loss. Hair grows an average of one centimeter per month. By the time I began the drawings, the longest hairs on my head measured about forty-one centimeters, dating their initial growth prior to my grandmother’s death. My hair was a timeline, a natural, tactile witness to my grandmother’s life.

I was also interested in the contradictions associated with hair in its various states and contexts. For instance, while attached to the body, hair plays an identifying role, projecting an array of historical, sexual, religious and cultural influences and preferences. When detached from the body, however, hair becomes an object whose identity is lost, often eliciting an unsavory response from those who witness its presence. I was inspired by this dichotomy in part, because prior to my grandmother’s death, I was repulsed by hair in its detached state.

After my grandmother’s death, the act of growing my hair became a personal homage to her. I realized, in time the follicles would eventually release each hair, therefore, I needed to reap the longest strands in order to preserve them. In theory, if I pulled them from my head, and immediately embedded them into the paper, the drawings would not only represent
my daily life, but would also be embodied by my daily life, thus connecting the past with the present.
“Once I knew, then I forgot. It was as if I had fallen asleep in a field only to discover at waking that a grove of trees had grown up around me. “Doubt nothing, believe everything,” was my friend’s idea of metaphysics, although his brother ran away with his wife. He still bought a rose for her everyday, sat in the empty house for the next twenty years talking to her about the weather. I was already dozing off in the shade, dreaming that the rustling trees were my many selves explaining themselves all at the same time so that I could not make out a single word. My life was a beautiful mystery on the verge of understanding, always on the verge! Think of it! My friend’s empty house with every one of its windows lit. The dark trees multiplying all around it.”

After embroidering eight hundred and thirty nine drawings, I read some of Charles Simic’s poetry. Immediately, I felt an affinity with his work. While reading, I was reminded of the “absence as presence” we are often confronted with while viewing a photograph.

Since ease rarely accompanies my ability to articulate verbally, the tactile vernacular of image making is the language in which I am able to express myself. Similar to Simic’s poem above, my drawings, with their slender, delicate contours and otherwise empty space, “consisted of a series of images always on the point of disclosing a secret or a revelation without ever actually doing so” (Delville, 173).

The self-portraits are a simple outline; they denote a body that has been emptied out, containing no other physiognomic or photorealistic evidence. According to Susan Sontag, “the force of a photograph is that it keeps open to scrutiny instants which the

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normal flow of time immediately replaces.”

Since the self-portraits were extracted from photographs of my body, and recreated using a material from my body at the present moment, they played a substitutive role to the photographic act of preserving the past.

CHAPTER 5
SUTURES

“It is said that mourning, by its gradual labor, slowly erases pain; I could not, I cannot believe this; because for me, Time eliminates the emotion of loss (I do not weep), that is all. For the rest, everything has remained motionless. For what I have lost is not a Figure (the Mother), but a being; and not a being, but a quality (a soul): not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable. I could live without the Mother (as we all do, sooner or later); but what life remained would be absolutely and entirely unqualifiable (without quality).”

The paper was my translator, the exterior ground for housing the allegorical relocation of memory from my body. This notion resonated with Elena del Rivero’s use of paper in her project [Swi:t] Home: A Chant, 2001–2006 (Figure 2.), due to the paper’s ability to “become a medium through which to both register and present the effects of activity and time.” Because of paper’s volatile nature, holes had to be carefully punctured into it to create a template through which I could sew. The hair was then embedded using a needle and a double run embroidery stitch. A run stitch is a short, single stitch that weaves through holes from one side of the paper to the other, creating a dotted line on both sides. In order to fill the cavities and create a solid line, the run stitch was repeated, thus it became a double run stitch. No other stitch or materials were used to create the drawings; these choices allude to the intimate and repetitiously performative aspect of the work.

A brief interlude of close inspection is required from the viewer to realize the fragile, visceral nature of the materials. Each drawing is comprised of a number in the top right

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corner, made with either one or two hairs. The self-portraits are made with between four and eight hairs (depending on detail), and the lines of text between eight and twelve. The simplicity and fluidity of the lines give the work a dynamic sense of tension, paralleling the relationship of memory and loss.

I manipulated the paper through various states, testing its delicacy and strength. The drawings containing text and extensive detail required copious punctures. Each hole damaged and stressed the paper, rendering it increasingly vulnerable, a metaphor for traumatic memories. Suturing the holes together with my hair reinforced the paper’s damaged structure, granting it strength.

After lacing the holes, a significant amount of empty space surrounded the taut stitches, disallowing the materials a sense of unity. Thereafter, each sheet of paper was immersed in a basin of water, allowing its fibers to soften, and be further manipulated. I then pressed the burr that had formed from puncturing the holes, refilling the void space, in an effort to mend and “heal” the paper.
Figure 2. Elena del Rivero, [Swiss] Home: A Chant, 2001–2006, dimensions variable.
Figure 3. Lyndsey Baldwin, October 31, 2006, hair and paper, 7 x 7 in., 2009.
CHAPTER 6
LEGACY OF TIME

“History as recorded in daily events, whether global, national or local, is bound together with the residues of individual activity and memorialized under the rubric of the date.”

Every sheet of Hahnemuhle paper contains a numerical drawing signifying a date. The dates begin on July 1, 2006, the day I arrived, and end on May 26, 2009, the day I will be leaving. The sheets were hand torn to measure seven inches by seven inches, reflecting the number of days per one calendar week. They were arranged according to their referent months and years to compose a room-size, calendrical grid. This method of installation permits the chronology of the numbers to stay true to the months they represent, as opposed to counting the accumulation of drawings.

I was inspired by Lisa Young’s project, Calendar, 2001-2003, in terms of its function as a recognizably calendrical structure. I was also interested in her seemingly nonchalant act of taking a photograph, versus the meticulous nature of the grid she displays them in. She stated, “Aesthetically, I juxtapose a casual approach to photography with carefully composed groupings that suggest disparate trajectories, mark the passage of time, or produce panoramic, yet fractured spaces.” I was especially interested in this remark, as it reflected the practices I had been performing. It also resonated with Elena del Rivero’s work and her

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concerns “with how materials gain and transmit meaning” as well as her “desire for control and the surrender to chance.”

Figure 4. Lisa Young, Calendar 2001-2003, 365 C-prints, installation view, dimensions variable, 2003.

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CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Creating the work for my MFA thesis was a cathartic, private practice, which permitted viewers only to witness the outcome, in its installation state; in other words, “the legacy of time spent.” The work inhabits and portrays a space between experience and memory. It was a meditative, tactile way of mimicking the body-mind’s “natural information processing system.”

“This system is likened to the healing system in the body that goes into action to heal a wound. When confronted with a trauma, the information processing system gets interrupted – like a blocked wound in the body. Just as the body is not able to heal a wound when there is debris in it, the brain often cannot process a trauma memory. In order for a wound to heal, we must clean it so the body can do its job.”

In the closing twenty-four hour period that the drawings inhabit the space of the East Gallery in Herter Hall, I will perform my final act of remembrance pertaining to this body of work. At an undisclosed time, in the location of my current studio, my mother, the only daughter of Rose Starrett, will cut my hair. It will first be interlaced into a single braid, and then cut off, remaining intact as a new “certificate of presence.” It will then be taken to the gallery and placed on a pedestal with a vitrine within the space housing the drawings. This act and separation of materials will create an additional dynamic in the work, whose synergy will allow the viewer to reflect on their own, collective experience.

The “release” of my hair is symbolic to the final healing phase of a wound. Though the mark of a scar is permanent, it remains a precious vestige of time, containing evidence of strength, and forever signifying the ability of the epidermis to finally shed its fragile, protective crust. There are twenty-five sheets of paper that do not contain any hair, as they fall after the closing of my show. Instead, I have used a vibrant, red embroidery floss to suture the holes. The color was chosen because it is the color I associate with my grandmother. Continuing my practice through new materials marks the completion of my body’s healing while remaining an “explicit act of remembrance.”

I am moving to Seattle, Washington the final week of May 2009 and it is of utmost importance to wear on me this visual, tactile evidence of my life in Massachusetts. It is for this reason that my head will not be shaved, as wearing the witness of time prevents us from erasing or forgetting our past; it acts as a constant reminder of our strength and capacity to endure.

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Run Stitch Remembrance was inspired by the practice of taking daily photographs in my studio at the University of Massachusetts. I used my Apple MacBook Pro’s built in camera with a program called Photo Booth to take the pictures. The photographs were all printed out by my Epson printer on cheap, copy/all purpose paper. I used a found lamp, an empty frame and a sheet of glass as a makeshift light box, to trace the outline of the photographs lightly in pencil onto the front of the paper. For this I used a Dixon Ticonderoga 3H pencil, purchased from the Guild.

I used a Dritz beading needle, pushed into a pencil eraser to puncture holes from the front side of the paper, following the traced pencil lines. This created a template through which to stitch. The needles were purchased from Jo-Ann Fabrics and Crafts. The pencil lines were then carefully erased.

The only materials used in the finished drawings were Hahnemuhle paper, hair and Coats & Clark polyester embroidery floss. The paper was purchased from Atlantic Papers. The hair was harvested directly from my head. The embroidery floss was purchased from Jo-Ann Fabrics and Crafts. Artist Tape, purchased from the Guild, was used to hang all of the drawings.


PHOTO OF ARTIST AT WORK