

Abstract and Specific Aims

My project is about women's experiences in life as told through their physical bodies. I especially want to explore two themes: how women experience and respond to the physical changes related to the life cycle and aging, and how their stories are affected by cultural expectations and ideals of femininity. I will use materials and techniques that are associated with traditionally feminine activities such as sewing, beadwork, and printing on fabric to create a mixed-media portrait of each woman. The project will feature the accounts of three women in their eighties, honoring the female figure as its subject and exploring each woman's perspective on her aging body. The completed portraits will use a combination of 2- and 3-dimensional, visual and audio formats to interpret the women's stories and develop them for gallery presentation.

The project emphasizes the use of traditionally feminine materials and processes, presenting the female figure in the context of the woman's experience of her own body, both in its aged condition and looking back over her lifespan. My first aim is to work with each participant to record her story in oral, written and visual formats. For her it is an opportunity to share her story and participate in its transformation into a work of art. Secondly, by approaching the narratives from multiple perspectives I hope in the gallery presentation to create an environment that, for a brief interval, draws the viewer into the lives of these three old women. As they contemplate three specific instances of feminine experience in twentieth-to-twenty-first century American culture, I hope for the viewer to imagine and appreciate the joys these women know, the changes and challenges they have faced, and the wisdom they possess.

Introduction

Much of my previous work includes elements of printmaking, construction, fiber work and collage. The female figure – often fragmented – is a recurrent theme. I have made casts in wax and plaster from dolls, from my own body and from live models and experimented with surface treatment, adding printed elements, bits of fiber and found objects as a way of developing the narrative aspect of my pieces. In the UAA studios I have learned many techniques for working in printmaking, ceramics, fiber and sculpture mediums. My current work tends to layer and combine mediums and approaches, overlooking traditional separations between them. I find myself experimenting more and more with blended disciplines and with bringing my printmaking into the three-dimensional realm. It is this experimentation and blending that I want to emphasize and develop with this project.

My subject matter frequently has to do with materials and activities that have conventionally been thought of as “women’s work.” Until very recently women were marginalized in the art world with little visibility other than being a model, muse or nurturer of men’s art careers. Mediums such as fiber and beads, typically employed by women to make clothing or functional and decorative items for the home, were relegated to the category of “craft” as opposed to “art,” the implication being that they were of lesser artistic significance. The subject matter of women’s lives – childbearing, family, domestic spaces, handwork and craft – was not seen as important in the masculine paradigm. The female body in art and even more so in the popular culture is still very often sexualized and idealized, an object for the appreciation of the implied male viewer. Less often is it an accurate representation or exploration of what it means to live a female life. The use of the female body and of “feminine” materials, techniques and subject matter in art is therefore political for me. This project proposes to utilize the so-called feminine vocabulary that has shaped my own experience since childhood to speak artistically about that female experience through the metaphor of the aging body.

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Both female and male role models influence my own work. Alaska printmaker Dale De Armond influenced my earliest printmaking efforts. I admire her playful sense of composition and use of narrative in her imagery. The figurative ceramic work of Chinese-Australian artist Ah Xian is another inspiration. The surfaces of his life-size portrait busts are covered with detailed paintings based on designs used historically on Chinese urns and vessels. I find Alexander Calder's mobiles and wire sketches both surprising and delightful. Some of my pieces feature kinetic aspects or implied motion that derive from his example. I look at lots of artwork and, while I don't necessarily find direct links, their work nonetheless intersects with areas of my own interest. Sally Mann makes photographs dealing with topics such as family, children and coming of age as a woman. Bea Nettles has made artist books and photographs documenting family and the cycles of women's lives. Jenny Saville's often-disturbing paintings emphatically do not emphasize the cultural ideals of feminine beauty. The works of other contemporary artists like Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Ann Hamilton, Janine Antoni and Marlene Dumas provide additional examples to inform and inspire any artist who wants to embrace the feminine in her – or his – work.

Project Design

I plan to create an installation of three mixed-media figurative pieces that explore the inhabitation of a physical body over a lifetime, including the inevitable malfunctions, injuries and just plain wearing out of its parts over time. In preparation for the pieces I will interview three women in their eighties to gather and record their stories. Having passed the midway point of my own life, I am interested to learn from the wisdom and insights of my foremothers. What physical and psychological impacts do they experience as a result of the gradual transformation from youth to age? Are they beautiful? Healthy? Strong? Wise? Whether we like it or not, our contemporary culture continues to place an emphasis on female beauty and physical perfection as an important source of a woman's identity. How do they transcend those cultural pressures? What roles have been theirs to play throughout their lives and how have they integrated the various and often conflicting aspects of identity to manifest whole selves?

Each woman's body will be traced onto a length of muslin fabric; these will later be embellished with printed, stitched and beaded elements. Using gauze impregnated with plaster, I will make casts of the relevant parts of each woman's body. I will build up the surfaces of each piece with small found objects and layers of hand-printed paper and fabric, with the women themselves as collaborative partners in the development of the verbal and visual imagery that tells their unique stories. The narratives of each woman will be interpreted on both the internal and external surfaces of the castings through collage, stitching and screen-printing methods. The final installation will combine the life-sized body tracings, their words and voices and the completed castings juxtaposed in a way that invokes the whole woman.

Anticipated Results

The finished portraits will be installed at the UAA Kimura Gallery and exhibited during the last weeks of April 2012. Each of the muslin tracings will be fastened to dowels and mounted on the wall so that the subject's feet hover 12"-18" above the floor. Several inches in front of the tracings, the sculpted body parts will be suspended from the ceiling by clear fishing line, positioned so that they line up in front of the corresponding area on the traced body. Recorded sound snippets from my conversations with the participants will be broadcast as a looped sound track. Each piece will be titled with the woman's first name (or a fictional first name if she prefers). A brief narrative of her experiences distilled from the interviews will accompany each piece as a framed print displayed on the wall nearby.

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Project Budget

Item	Source	Cost
Travel		
Round-trip airfare Anchorage-Seattle	Alaska Airlines	400.00
Car Rental	Enterprise	300.00
Personnel		
Honorarium for models		600.00
Materials		
Plaster Modeling Tape	Nasco	75.00
Muslin	JoAnn Fabrics	40.00
Paper	Daniel Smith	170.00
Screen printing inks, photo-emulsion	Dick Blick	200.00
Dowels	Dick Blick	65.00
Framing and matting materials	Daniel Smith	150.00
Total:		2,000.00

Budget Justification

Item	Justification	Cost
Travel		
Round-trip airfare Anchorage-Seattle	The three project participants whose stories will be portrayed through the artwork live in the Seattle area, where I grew up. I have known them all my life and, their lives and stories have been interconnected for more than 60 years. It is necessary to travel to Seattle to complete the interviews, recordings, body tracing and casting.	400.00
Car Rental	It will be necessary to travel around the Seattle area to meet with the participants during the week I am there to complete the interviews, recordings, body tracing and casting.	300.00
Personnel		
Honorarium for participants	The honorarium is an acknowledgement for the time and information shared by the three participants, without whom the proposed artwork could not be completed. Each woman will receive \$150. One of the participants provides 24-hour care for her spouse. The remaining \$150 will help to defray expenses for a substitute caregiver during the interview and casting sessions.	600.00
Materials		
Plaster Molding Tape	22 lbs – for making the casts of body parts	75.00
Muslin	15-yd. bolt – for the body tracings and for printed images that will be applied to the surfaces of the sculpted elements	40.00
Paper	10-yd roll of mulberry paper 30-yd roll of masa paper For printed images that will be applied to the surfaces of the sculpted elements	170.00
Screen printing inks, photo-emulsion	For printing onto the paper and fabric	200.00
Dowels	For mounting the completed body tracings to prepare them for gallery display	65.00
Framing and matting materials	A narrative for each woman will be distilled from interview records, then printed, matted and framed as a part of the gallery presentation.	150.00
Total:		2,000.00

Project References

- Calder, Alexander and Jean Davidson. *Calder; An Autobiography with Pictures*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1966 (Introduction, 1977).
- Chicago, Judy and Edward Lucie-Smith. *Women and Art: Contested Territory*. First published in 1998 by Weidenfeld & Nicholson Ltd. London; 2004 edition by Eagle Editions, Royston, Hertfordshire, England.
- De Armond, Dale. *Dale De Armond: A first Book Collection Of Her Prints*. Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Publishing Company, 1979.
- Gagosian Gallery. *Jenny Saville*. New York: Rizzoli, 2005.
- Grosenick, Uta, Ed. *Women Artists in the 20th and 21st Century*. Koln: Taschen, 2003.
- Mann, Sally. *Immediate Family*. New York: Aperture, 2005.
- Mann, Sally. *At 12: Portraits of Young Women*. New York: Aperture, 2005.
- Queensland Art Gallery. *Ah Xian*. Queensland, Australia: Queensland Art Gallery, 2003.
- www.beanettles.com

Project Timeline

The project will be completed during Spring Semester, 2012 culminating in an exhibition in the Kimura Gallery at the end of April, 2012.

January 2012

- Travel to Seattle: meet with each of 3 participants to complete interviews, body tracings, body casting and voice recordings
- Order materials and equipment
- Develop imagery

February 2012

- Work on imagery, surfaces and embellishment of cast pieces and tracings.
- Edit recordings and develop looped tape.

March 2012

- Continue to work on imagery, surfaces and embellishment of cast pieces and tracings. Prepare them for display by attaching hanging lines and dowels.
- Distill a narrative for each woman from interview records; print, mat and frame.

April 2012

- Complete pieces to assure that they are ready to exhibit.
- Install exhibit in gallery