MODERN IDENTITY: IN A STATE OF FLUX

A THESIS

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BY

JUDY WAND

PATRICIA NELSON – ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

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I. Statement of Problem

Growing up on the farm, I observed many things that I anticipated to be part of my future. My parents experienced the challenges of farm life; lack of income and the need to prosper. My father designed, built and fixed farm equipment to solve problems on the farm. My mother did the same within the home by preserving food for winter months and making and repairing clothes. They each solved any problem at hand, and were rarely intimidated. Like my parents, I choose to design and build my own solutions, but unlike them, I design as a means to organize and understand what I am seeing. I rely heavily on visual cues, seeing components help me comprehend and retain information. This mental organization has been enabled by the use of the container format. Through research, I found that women’s lives experienced great change as a result of the Industrial Revolution, Great Depression, and World War II. As families moved from rural areas to cities for work, women began to work outside of the home to help support the family unit and replace men who went overseas to fight. When men returned home from the war to reclaim jobs, US economy became stable and a portion of women returned to the home. Some women continued to work because they enjoyed work and the extra income it provided, but nurturing the family was still the primary responsibility. Others returned to the home to take care of the family. Today many women are the financial heads of the household and primary decision makers for the family unit. I chose to illustrate this shift from a family-only focus to a family and wage earner focus with three women, each different time periods. These women are presented as shoe replicas.

Knowledge I gained through research about women and family structure enabled me to visualize and plan three shoe containers representing 1900, 1950, and 2014.
The shoe to represent 1900 was modeled after a boot commonly worn during that time. Boots of this period were laced through many eyelets or fastened with a series of buttons (http://www.collectorsweekly.com/shoes/womens-pre-1950s, July 2014). The stiletto heel was introduced in 1953 by Christian Dior Designer, Roger Vivier. A shootie, a woman’s ankle high boot-like shoe that merges the style of a boot and dress shoe, was chosen to represent 2014. Inside each of these shoes are elements that reference family, housework, and possibly work outside of the home during the time period.

II. Review of Influences and Literature

For this series, I looked to the work of Ron Ho and Markio Kusumoto for inspiration. Both of these artists relate their narratives with visual symbols that consist of a collection of found objects and fabricated pieces.

Markio Kusumoto is a Japanese artist who began her study of art in high school, where she developed basic skills of drawing, sculpture, design and painting. As a daughter of a Buddhist priest, she spent her youth residing in a Buddhist temple that was founded over 400 years ago. After graduating high school she studied oil painting and printmaking at Musashino Art College in Tokyo. At the age of 23, she moved to the United States to attend graduate school at the Academy of Art College in San Francisco.
Francisco to further her education and craft for printmaking, focusing on etching. Near the end of her graduate education, she took some courses in jewelry and small metal sculpture.

Kusumoto’s move to the United States did two things: it exposed her to metal sculpture and jewelry making and brought into focus her desire to remain connected to her culture. The metal courses provided an avenue she had been seeking for her etchings; she was now able to take her etchings into three dimensional form. Today she does very little printmaking, but still incorporates etching into her sculptural forms. In addition to this, change of location brought into focus how different she was from everyone else. In an effort to hold on to her heritage and memories of Japan, she began a body of work that connects the viewer to her memories and her feelings about where she is from.

I have enjoyed looking at her collection of pieces, because she combines shape and color in an interesting manner that specifically references her knowledge of printmaking into a dimension beyond paper. The viewer can open and examine each piece, set it down, pick up another part of the series to do the same, and then step back and look at it all together as a collection. A piece that I have found especially interesting by Kusumoto is a piece titled Self-Entertainment Kit. This piece is a fabricated vertical box that opens to reveal several well constructed forms, each unique in its own content. These constructed forms also open to reveal even more specific information related to its exterior, offering deeper meaning explaining significance of the exterior.
Self-Entertainment Kit
Mariko Kusumoto
Japan
A second piece I found influential is Daughter’s Room, designed as a response to her curiosity for the human body and new life after birthing her daughter. The piece is designed in the shape of a pregnant female torso, that opens with a door knob, keyhole and key to reveal a skeletal system with deeper exposed interiors. Under the rib cage lies the woman's organs, which also open. The stomach opens to reveal a fetus in three stages of development. This next door opens to expose a music box and a boy attached with a magnet that moves with the music. The boy can be hung above a horse and a switch will illuminate the moon above. Items also seen in this interior are photos of a child and other references to childhood.
The second artist I looked to for inspiration for my thesis project is Ron Ho, teacher and artist whose work incorporates elements of travel and culture. Ho grew up in Hawaii of Chinese decent. At the age of 18 he chose to enroll in Pacific Lutheran College in Tacoma, Washington. He graduated with a BA in Art Education in 1958. He began to teach in the Hoquiam Public School before changing to the Bellevue Public School system where he spent his career as an educator, retiring in 1992. He balanced his work as a teacher with his artwork with one fueling the other as he introduced his own ideas to his students as a means to help them find their own creative sources.

Ho’s work is inspired by his desire to bridge the cultural and physical distances between Hawaii, Seattle and his ancestor’s birthplace in China. His family migrated from an area near Hong Kong to Hawaii in 1878, seeking steady work and good wages from sugar plantations. After saving for 12 years his grandfather was able to purchase his own farm in Kula, Maui. In 1898 his grandfather married, and Ho’s father was the fifth out of eight children. The children in their family were baptized in an Episcopal Church and studied Chinese and English in school. In 1934, Ho’s father married. Ron Ho was born in Honolulu in 1936.

Ho earned an Master of Art Education with an emphasis in painting from University of Washington. A short time after he earned his degree, he took several jewelry courses with Ramona Solberg at Bellevue Community College. Solberg was highly influential to Ho; she encouraged him to research ethnic jewelry design and pursue his family’s line of acenstry as a source for design inspiration. The result was the creation of a body of work inspired by his family’s migration from China to Hawaii and his migration to Washington. Ho’s pieces are composed of jewelry designs that are of a Chinese asthetic, elegant and balanced, sometimes asymmetrical. The designs include well planned clasps, closures and connections designed to complemet the overall piece. Found objects were primary componets used in his work until the early 1990s. At this point, he began to fabricate objects from his
Chinese heritage. An example of this is the piece titled Dim Sum at the On-On Tea Room. This necklace piece features a Ming Dynasty chair fabricated in silver. The chair serves a platform to build from to tell a story about food and his Chinese family.

A second piece by Ho that I found influential as I approached my thesis work is a piece titled TV Guide. This piece is replica of a Chinese altar table fabricated from silver. On the table is a television and other objects. The pendant is suspended from a green cord. His attention to detail and desire to fabricate small versions of objects inspired and challenged me to develop my own ideas for what I could recreate as contents for my shoe series.
After fabricating a ring series that focused on women’s work, as defined by my mother and grandmother, I began to wonder when the idea of women’s work began. The primary intention was to represent a day in the life of a woman in 1900, 1950 and modern day focusing on family, home and work. Work is defined differently by each woman’s time period. Prior to 1950, work consisted of maintaining the family unit, providing clothing, food, and assisting with anything that needed done whether it was helping to manage the family store or the family farm. Children worked along side adults as their age permitted. Girls learned the production of wool, preserving food, making soap, and many other things. Boys worked with their fathers in the fields, chopping wood, carrying water, taking care of livestock, and working the fields.

A sequence of events over the next 50 years affected women, society’s norms, and family structure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Historical Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1929-1940</td>
<td>Great Depression</td>
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<tr>
<td>1931-39</td>
<td>Dust Bowl</td>
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<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Fair Labor Act</td>
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<td>1939-1945</td>
<td>World War II</td>
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<td>Dec 1941</td>
<td>US joins war front</td>
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<tr>
<td>1946-1964</td>
<td>Baby Boom</td>
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<td>1947-1991</td>
<td>Cold War</td>
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As the United States entered the depression era, drought affected crops, which caused families to migrate to cities to work in factories. The whole family continued to work; instead of on the farm, they worked in the factory. The Fair Labor Act was passed by Congress in 1938. This act set age requirements for different types of work, specifying the minimum age of 16 as a requirement for work during school hours. This removed many young children from the family’s work force. Children spent more time at home. The start of World War II triggered young couples to marry earlier. The US joined the fight in 1941 and women joined the work force to replace men in defense industries.
At the war’s end many women returned to homemaking, others remained in the workforce. The population was on the rise signaling the beginning of the baby boom. The boom of births led to a shift in emphasis of marriage from the couple to the children. Ladies home magazines proposed that life was centered almost completely around children and the home. This brought both parents into the family picture, removing parents from other aspects of life that did not include the whole family. Formulas provided by these magazines outlined how to plan family activities that included parent companionship and family unity. These magazines were often percieved as the perscription for how the 50s family life should be. Family had always been important, but now it held high value. Children stayed home longer, high school graduation became the norm. It had evolved into the nuclear family, a married man and woman with two children that established ties across generations to extended family.

Middle class American women in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s turned to wage earned work for an additional contribution to family life. The quantity of married women earning a wage increased from 33% in their 20s to 60% in their 50s during the years 1950-1960 (Weiss 2000, 50). This increase was a result of the larger number of married women, availability of part-time work, and the creation of sevice labor. A rise in marriage rate in wartime left fewer single unmarried women. Barriers for hiring married women disappeared as the population of single women dwindled (52). The establishment of part-time work provided more mothers and wives opprotunity to flexible work schedules as their children entered school age. The expansion of the service work force created an increased opprotunity for women to work in secretarial jobs. As a result, women of the 50s largely earned a wage as secretaries, teachers, nurses, stewardesses and stenographers. Women accepted wage earned work for a combination of reasons. The value of a paycheck was evidence of work done. The additional pay provided the family unit a better financial position for home ownership and material home improvements such as an electric dryer or other modern amenities. It is also cited that women worked outside of the home as a reaction to the dissatisfied lives of their mothers.
The total number of women earning a living away from the home, regardless of age, has been steadily increasing since the 1950s. By 1972, the typical middle-class family could no longer be described as headed by a male breadwinner and a full-time stay at home wife. Family need and desire for a more comfortable standard of living inspired women’s commitment to continue to work. Despite this growth, Americans continue to view changes in women’s work and family patterns as new (Weiss 2000, 53). Magazines, TV, and internet continue to present stereotypes from the 1950s, but there is little value to this. Our society is not the same as it was in the 1950s. Families today are a mixture of single parent, divorced and remarried, adoptive or grandparents. The blending mix of family structures has left the ideal 1950s nuclear family in the minority (http://family.lovetoknow.com/about-family-values/types-family-structures, 8/10/14).

Women’s place of employment have changed little since the 1950s, even with the rise of higher educated women. Factors that have affected women’s advancement in the workplace are primarily related to childcare and workplace ability to offer flexible schedules that allow women to work while taking care of children. Today most women work as nurses, teachers and administrative assistants, (http://money.cnn.com/2013/01/31/news/economy/secretary-women-jobs/index.html, 10/8/2014). The responsibility of household duties are still primarily held by women, an issue that is still related to gender (Collins 2009, 360). Couples who have tried to divide the housework evenly spend much time negotiating on standards of cleanliness and procedure for tasks.

Methods

The pieces I created are formed using traditional methods for forming flat sheet metal into three-dimensional objects. Tasks of soldering dimensional forms, die forming metal, chasing, repousse, and hammering metal over steel stakes were a part of the construction process. I researched methods cobblers use for making shoes and viewed how armored footwear was designed. Both of these methods analyze the foot’s form, cutting patterns that mimic its form while allowing for the foot to flex
and move. Their differences lie in the materials used and their structural properties. I purchased 3 pairs of shoes to use as models to help with planning. Patterns were cut from fabric then translated to manila file paper. Paper pattern pieces were made and connected for each shoe style. Once these pattern pieces were of correct scale, form and shape, they were cut from copper. These copper pattern pieces were shaped and formed. The paper model was constantly referenced through the entire construction process. Once construction was complete, fine details were added to refine and enhance the shapes. Elements were chosen to be included inside the containers to correlate with each woman. Symbols of family are represented in silver for each of these pieces for its significance.
III. Description of Artworks

In Her Shoes: 1900
Materials: Copper, Sterling silver, found objects

The piece In Her shoes: 1900 was modeled after a boot commonly worn by women in the late 1800s and early 1900s (http://www.footwearhistory.com/, 8/2013). During this time a woman’s daily life consisted mostly of responsibilities that related to the family and its welfare. Life was filled with necessary things, people of that time lived modestly, focused on providing basic needs for survival. Practical shoes were chosen to represent 1900. A working model was developed and refined. Tube
rivets for lacing holes and crocheted wire laces details refine the piece. A shoe tree container form for inside the shoe was added. The shoe tree compliments the boot to further acentuate the time period. Inside the shoe tree are three objects. In 1900, caring for children was equally as important as caring for the home and preparing food. The three objects contained in the shoe tree container represent sewing (sewing machine), cooking (stove pot), and family (silver diaper pin).

In Her Shoes: 1950

Materials: Copper, sterling silver, found objects

Our country entered a period of prosperity after WWII. Businesses and manufacturing were profitable and our culture values were changing. Previously, religion had played a large role in how we raised our children. Our methods for earning a living shifted from working in the fields or in the mines as we moved to cities. City living provided little work to keep idle children busy. Women found that their list of things to do decreased; there was no longer land or cattle to care for. Family became a cherished unit; the nuclear family was celebrated. It was still anticipated that women would wear dresses. The idealized 1950s woman made popular by ladies magazines dressed women in heels while doing housework. After considering this information, I chose to represent the time period with a stiletto heel that became popular during the 50s. This shoe has a single container with a fabricated lid.
that is accented with silver. Through the clear lid, a fabricated silver baby rattle is revealed. The baby rattle is presented in this way to emphasize the significance of family in the nuclear age. At the toe there is an image of a typewriter, and at the heel, there are sliding images of a vacuum and kitchen mixer. The image of the typewriter was chosen to symbolize the most common job held by women in 1950. The electric mixer and vacuum are represented because they are tools that made it easier for women to work part time and maintain the family’s welfare.
In Her Shoes: 2014
Materials: copper, silver, found objects

When considering the plan and design of the modern shoe I looked at women’s daily lives today. I talked with my friends who have families, listened to co-workers as they recounted their prior weekend or evening activities of the previous day. I considered what we all do today, how we each are different yet are still very similar. There is still the element of something important in our lives. For some its only work, for some its only family, but for most women its both. The development of the right form began as with the other two pieces. The new element for this piece is the addition of a snake
skin texture to add variety into the series. The piece In Her Shoes: 2014 was modeled after a type of shoe called a shootie which merges the design of a high heeled shoe and ankle boot into one. Unlike the container for In Her Shoes: 1950, the container within this shoe is hidden. Once the lid is opened three items are exposed: a silver baby bottle, a sequence of computer keys (Pause/Break & Home), and an office chair. When these items are viewed together I think they represent our lives as we work to manage work and family.

IV. Conclusion

As a nation we face many challenges that stem from the changes in our society. Our work ethic and desired lifestyles affect each part of our lives in response to culture changes and events that affect our daily lives. At each turn we make decisions that are in response to our surroundings. Today there is a blending of cultures and perceptions about women and family. Many women entering the workforce in their 20s are daughters of women who managed family and work. Some of these daughters grow up with their natural mother and father married, many others grew up with varied childhoods with or without fathers. Role models for these women are relative to their up bringing that continues to evolve in following generations. The future for women and men will always be changing as we react to an environment that is changing daily. We will continue to move beyond practices implemented by our parents because their way of living doesn’t fit today. I’m not sure that we will forget the idealized ways of the 1950s. Magazines, television and technology have a way of subtly reminding and reinforcing preset ideals that are no longer applicable. Families today rely on what is best or what works, rather than following a formula as outlined by the nuclear family. This is a recurring fact, society responds to need and desire from the environment. My presentation of shoes for women for 1900, 1950 and modern day represents a fraction of the female population. I believe it would require several shoes that vary in style and contents to present the full scope of women and family.
This series was personally enriching on many levels. It challenged me to plan and build cohesive designs that considered form and its meaning in relation to contents inside. Viewing the final pieces together with the information I learned about women, work, and family, I find that the ideals I grew up identifying as my own were flawed. As role models, my mother and grandmother made choices in relation to their contemporaries, reacting to their own environments. I altered my future course from theirs by choosing college education and earning a wage to support myself independently. When I chose this path it was unknown to me that it would lead to such a different life situation.
V. Exhibition Statement

A State of Flux

For this body of work, I have focused on constructing container forms that contain other containers – boxes within boxes - with an interior opening that reveals surprising contents. A general theme about women and identity developed as I planned each piece as I reflected on my ideas about being a daughter, wife and woman. First was the piece titled Germination, a piece that tells the story of corn and its value for my family. The next piece, Fabricating a New Destiny relates a story about me, the farmer’s daughter who takes what she has learned, moving forward to something new, hoping to break the mold that was set at birth. The I Do container and ring series followed next. This series explores women’s roles as displayed by my mother and grandmother. The series of rings are presented in replicas of hand lotion containers as a means of answering the question of why the lotions are needed. The last piece, my creative project is In Her Shoes: 1900, 1950, and 2014. Shoes were chosen for my creative project because they are an object that women wear on a daily basis. In those shoes over time our lives have been similar; traditionally women have been the caretakers of the home and family.

Through research I found that women’s lives began to change during and after WWII, when women began to work outside of the home. Work was not taken seriously; a job outside of the home was for variety. As time passes women take work outside of the home more seriously, some become the financial head of household. In each of my shoes there is a silver object that represents the family for its value. Included with the silver piece is another object or symbol that represents part of that woman’s day whether it was cooking, cleaning, sewing, or office work. Together the objects and shoes represent a small part of who these women are; each is so much more than what is seen.
VI. Reference List and/or Bibliography


