Embody

An Honors Thesis (ART 490)

By

Caitlin Rae Lynch

Thesis Advisor: Hannah Barnes

Ball State University
Muncie, IN

May 2010

Expected Date of Graduation
May 2010
Abstract

For my senior show, Embody, I’ve decided to focus on one of my favorite subjects; the figure. Rather than creating images of figures in space, however, these pieces are more about the experience of physicality. Our bodies influence our perceptions, turning even an action as basic as touching one’s own hand into a personal, subjective experience—something Maurice Merleau-Ponty called the “primacy of perception.” In addition to physical sensation, I’ve used the figure as metaphor to explore emotional sensation and my own anxieties over ideas of surface/depth, strength/fragility.

All of the pieces in this show relate especially to skin, touch, and the idea of the barrier between Us and Other. With these thoughts in mind, I chose to work primarily with watermedia and paper. Both materials have a feeling of impermanence and fragility. In thinking of the paper as a metaphor for skin, I am especially drawn to the way watermedia can penetrate and stain the paper itself.

The idea of ‘serious play’ and the importance of process has led me to look to the work of the Dadaists as well as the Fluxus movement of the 1960’s. While I love the idea of artist as philosopher, and concept as its own beautiful art, I’m also still attracted to sculptors and painters like Eva Hesse and Robert Rauschenberg, the physicality of things.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my family for that first box of crayons and continued support. Many many thanks to my thesis adviser Hannah Barnes and the rest of the art department for four years of unending guidance, patience, knowledge, friendship, support, making sure I graduate with all ten fingers and most of my sanity, and (___insert less cheesy way of saying “helping me realize my dream ___)
For my senior show, Embody, I decided to focus on one of the oldest subjects, the figure. Rather than creating images of figures in space, however, these pieces are more about the experience of being a figure, of physicality. Our bodies influence our perception, turning even an action as basic as touching one’s own hand into a personal, subjective experience—something phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty called the “primacy of perception.” In addition to physical sensation, I also used the figure as a metaphor to explore emotional sensation and my own anxieties over ideas of surface/depth, strength/fragility. All the pieces in this show relate especially to skin, touch and the idea of the barrier between Us and Other. With these thoughts in mind, I chose to work primarily with watermedia and paper. In thinking of paper as a metaphor for skin I am especially drawn to the way watermedia can penetrate and stain the paper itself, the way both can interact with light, and conceptually, the impermanence associated with works on paper as well as the body.

Even though I have always been relatively healthy, for most of my life my body has been a source of anxiety for me. It’s not about pain or even a fear of death. Pain comes and goes eventually and death’s too inevitable to worry too much about, too stable. What bothers me is the instability and complete lack of control I have over anything below my surface, or even the surface (skin) itself. My mom is a nurse who used to work in the gastroenterology (read: guts) department, and growing up I can remember looking at and being repulsed by images from strangers’ insides. This disgust hasn’t waned, but as I’ve gotten older I’ve also become somewhat seduced by the specific science of it all. I’ve become fascinated by my body, how it fits into space, how ‘I’ fit into it.

For Self-portrait without mirror, I started with the idea of what a self-portrait really
is. So far the closest and most ‘accurate’ self-portraits I’ve done have been with a mirror (being more immediate than a photo). The process of translating the 3D form of the human face into a 2D representation is mediated and fragmented. Even in mirrors, the image is backwards and I can only see what it looks like when my eyes are open or when my face is between movements. “This-This shape of the eyes, this expanse between the nose and upper lip, this is who I am” can be more accurately stated as “This is how you probably perceive my face.” The image I have in my mind of what I look like is a combination of different views-photos, descriptions, reflections in car windows- what Merleau-Ponty described as “The flat projection of these perspectives and of all possible perspectives...the perspective-less position from which all can be derived, the house seen from nowhere...” (Merleau-Ponty, 67). Instead of trying to duplicate this portmanteau image, with this piece I wanted to show a view of my face that was singularly mine, what I could see without a mirror.

Even a mirror though, is an inaccurate means of seeing how other people see me. Everything is backwards and I can only see what it looks like when my eyes are open or when my face is between movements.

Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of perception are also key in Touch/Touched, just out of reach. The piece itself began as an experiment with material. Having discovered the way in which wet tracing paper can be molded around a simple form (a plastic ball) and dried to create a cast of that form, I decided to try something more complex and organic, like my finger. I liked how the casts looked on the outside, but enjoyed the insides just as much. I particularly liked the way that simply through inversion, what was a finger became something alien and marine-like. I decided to stand some of each index finger, some right side up, and some inverted, into two boxes, roughly two feet by two feet. In thinking of the specifics of
the display, though, I started to think about what measurements like "feet" really mean. How we define and navigate space, judge distance, all of this is relative to how our bodies fit into an available space. With that in mind, I then used my own body as a reference (translated into inches) to determine the display the casts. The fingers are displayed one finger's length apart in boxes two 'Cat-feet' (roughly eighteen inches) and the boxes themselves are separated by just over my arm's length.

With this piece I was also thinking about the idea of touch, touching and being touched, and how strange it is that with two parts (fingers) of the same whole (a body) you can simultaneously touch and feel yourself. The right box is full of index fingers from my right hand while the left box is full of fingers from the left. The two are inverted and ready to fit together, but separated by the space between the two (a space, which, I can't touch either). Unlike Self portrait without mirror, which attempts to make a simple impossibility possible, this piece is my attempt at making the mundanely possible (touching my two index fingers together) significant and impossible.

Both 28 Days and A series documenting the healing process; a tribute to Frida Kahlo have to do with skin's near-magical ability to heal and also the repulsion that comes with needing to be healed in the first place. In A series documenting... I used a phone camera to take near daily pictures of a strange, dime-sized patch on my hand of what was either some sort of poison ivy or a reaction to mangos. I then used these pictures as the basis of fifteen small watercolors on mulberry paper. The decision to use mulberry paper came from the way it absorbed and dispersed the pigment, fusing pigment with surface. Visually, I liked the soft bleeds this created and metaphorically I liked the idea of staining in relation to the scarring that was happening on my hand itself.
The idea of disease and decay, especially in relation to skin holds a particular disgust for me. I don’t completely know why this is, but I do know that part of it is the way it reminds me of how fragile our skin is. Of all my organs, the skin seems to me like it should be impenetrable. Because it encapsulates all the bits and organs I call my body, having some part of it broken or open is disturbing. I have a strange seduction/repulsion relationship with skin disease as well. Scabs gross me out, but I can’t help picking at them either. I have a similar response to the work of one of my favorite painters, to whom this piece was dedicated; Frida Kahlo. Most of her work is difficult for me to look at, but at the same time I admire the way she not only acknowledged her illness, failure and frailty, but really embraced it. Even more interesting to me is how being vulnerable in her paintings doesn’t make her seem ‘weak.’ If anything, the way she embraced fragility only suggests even more strength.

As with Touch/touched, 28 Days began as a simple experiment in materials. Knowing that sunlight bleached construction paper if left out, I wanted to see if I could intentionally control this process. Each day I would tape a new piece of paper to my window so that by the end of the process I had pieces exposed to sunlight in amounts ranging from 1 to 28 days. Like Touch/touched, at some point in this piece I felt the need to come up with a conceptual reason for what could have been arbitrary decisions. I chose the number of days based on how long it takes a new layer of skin to come to the surface completely. Since my maternal grandmother’s melanoma ten years ago and my father’s basal cell last summer, I’ve been especially aware of the way time and sun can affect skin. At the same time, the fact that skin is so subject to change and is so ephemeral is also really beautiful.

Bit in 3 and And what it is comes are two sides to the same idea. Both use the body
as a metaphor for emotional fragility and are the hardest in the show for me to explain in words. It is important that my work be meaningful and from personal experience, but how do I do that when the most personal and most meaningful is also the most private? One answer I have found to this question is to use literary references and fictional narratives to address real world feelings/stories, as well as using minimal or abstract forms.

The title for *Bit in 3* comes from the line in Sylvia Plath’s poem *Daddy*: “A cleft in your chin instead of your foot/ But not less a devil for that, no not/ Any less the black man who/ Bit my pretty red heart in two.” (PLATH, ? fix footnote after bib.). I have always interpreted the poem as a rage, not towards a father who was abusive, but towards someone who the speaker has loved and trusted and who betrayed her by doing the worst thing a loved one can do- die. That not just my body, but also the bodies of people whom I love can break down and fail is easily the scariest thing in the world to me. The title of *And what it is comes* is from an E. E. Cummings poem, *I like my body*. While Cummings’s poem is largely about sexuality/erotic experience and how that can affect how you perceive your body, this piece is also about the experience of being open and fragile and intimate with friends, family, etc. Letting people through my emotional ‘skin’ is scary, even seemingly dangerous- but it can also be liberating. It can change and has changed the way I see myself. It’s only recently that I’ve started to feel comfortable in my own skin (har har) and this is due in large part to finally letting other people explore the depth below that surface.

In both *And what it is comes* and *Bit in 3* I wanted to see just how far I could push my tracing paper casting technique. I had had success casting small, organic shapes (my fingers) but wanted to try casting with more flat planes (the boxes) as well as a larger area (my torso). The boxes represent a figure and how what is supposed to be the outer
protective layer is sometimes just as stitched together and fragile as what’s being protected. I wanted to convey the idea of insides without relying on the clichéd symbolism attached to certain specific organs. So, I combined two or three organ shapes to create each one. The three pieces rest on a light box; this is meant to further highlight the stitching, transparency and fragility of the objects. The light box also feels somewhat clinical, referencing the way hospital imaging (x-rays, MRIs, etc.) make visible that which I would rather not see. This feeling on invasiveness is a large part of why hospitals are such places of anxiety in my mind. In And what it is comes, I wanted to use my own body as a way of claiming, despite my own insecurities, what I define as physically totally mine: the core, the torso. The paraffin wax, in addition to helping the cast paper to hold its form, also gives it a shiny, visceral, skin feeling, different from the papery dryness of Bit in 3. Through a series of events too long for an already long paper, apples are a personal symbol for me, expressing both sexuality and intimacy (both sexual and platonic), as well as an innocent, wild, child-like joy. The closest description I can get to expressing this duality is by saying it’s my equivalent of a barbaric Yawp.

Taxonomy of self and other grew out of my fascination for the ideas of Self and Other as well as my interest in early naturalists. It’s easy to say ‘This is me. This is my body, the limits of my body are the physical limits of me.’ But even within the body, how much do I identify as Me and how much is just Mine. (example – the thought of cutting my fingernails is no big thing. The thought of losing a leg, even if, in the world of philosophical ‘whatifs’ and impossible things, I were to feel no more pain than I do when I cut my fingernails, I still feel a tingly, crawly, ‘no’ reaction to it, because it’s part of Me.

To explore this idea, I created forty-nine tracing paper casts and arranged
them on a table in a simulation of an early naturalist taxonomy table. In playing with the arrangement of the pieces, I looked at insect collections of early naturalists as well as Anne Hamilton’s Between Taxonomy and Communion [1]. In Hamilton’s piece I especially liked the way in which she used taxonomy as a starting point but ultimately followed her own logic. I started with the supertype (in this case the body) and broke it down into seven components, gradually decreasing in size and recognizability; calf, forearm, finger, big toe, finger joint, toe joint and thumb nail. I then cast each seven times, in gradually increasing amounts of time from one second to more than twelve minutes. Time, and its effect on material, has become a major theme in a lot of my work. I’m particularly interested in entropy, and the way systems which may seem rigid and fixed can break down over time. I had originally set up a rigid mathematical system for coming up with the number of body parts and the length of time each cast dried, but ultimately adhered to it only loosely. I have to remind myself sometimes that even when borrowing from other areas—science, math, etc, that I’m still an artist and ultimately not bound to follow any sort of ‘rule’ save those I create for myself.

My senior thesis show was the culmination of four years of undergraduate study and an attempt to synthesis all the different interests I have. And while it marks the end of one period, it also marks the beginning of another. Being my own boss, creating a cohesive body of work and installing it all according to my own vision has made clear several interests I hope to explore more in my future work. First, I feel I’ve only barely explored the body as subject. I want to do more with not just the skin, but other systems and other experiences involving the body and perception. I also want to see how far I can take tracing paper casting, both alone and with other materials (wax in particular has me intrigued. The idea of ‘art as a conversation’ has come to extend beyond the piece itself into how the viewer
interacts with it. While working this semester, the display of each piece became almost as important as making the piece itself. Installing the show, too, was almost like making an eighth piece. Display and interactivity are things I hope to explore in future work.

Over the past four years my work has become less and less narrative as my interest in conceptual art has grown, although I don’t know if I can ever abandon my love of the physicality of things. This show is not a farewell to painting and image making, but instead, a hello to whole-heartedly embracing what I’ve come to think of as my identity as a maker of meaning-packed objects.

Cummings, E. E., “i like my body.”

<http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/eecummings>


<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15291>
1. Self portrait without mirror
   watercolor and ink on BFK Reeves

2 - 4. Touch/Touched – Just out of reach.
   trace paper, water, pigment

5 - 7. A series documenting the healing process; a tribute to Frida Kahlo
   watercolor on mulberry paper

8 - 9. 28 Days
   construction paper exposed to gradually increasing amounts of sunlight for the length of time it takes skin to regenerate

10. Bit in 3
   trace paper, water, silk, thread

11. And what it is comes
   trace paper, water, paraffin wax, thread and oil on canvas

12 - 13. Taxonomy of Self and Other
   Trace paper, water

14 – 15. Display shots