

OPPRESSION, SUPPRESSION, DETACHMENT, GROWTH

A thesis exhibition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

By

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ABSTRACT

OPPRESSION, SUPPRESSION, DETACHMENT, GROWTH

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Since 2007 I have been creating installation art with the plant kudzu as the primary medium. My work often develops by changing over a period of time. In some of my work I use the pared down, dried kudzu vine as 3-dimensional “drawings” that emphasize pure form, lines, and shape. In other installations, I am inspired by the work of Andy Goldsworthy and Louise Bourgeois where the materials used, support the idea behind the art. In these I make metaphorical references to what the kudzu does: overwhelm almost everything in its path. This focus evolved into my thesis installation titled, *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth*. The work has been documented since May 2009. In it, I used growing kudzu and personal objects related to my family. Both the kudzu and objects are saturated with meaning. Together, given time in their environment, they convey a narrative of family dysfunction and abuse.

This documented thesis and museum installation began by my clearing a twenty-foot by twenty-foot kudzu infested hillside in Sylva. This outdoor environment was chosen to inform and develop the art. The majority of the objects included in this installation originally belonged to three generations of my family. Their arrangements are a reflection of my family history, one of oppression and suppression and my subsequent

detachment from family events. The installation changed with the seasons and became more focused to a specific and inevitable outcome due to the damaging effects of the ruthless kudzu growth. Metaphorically, the results of this study illustrate a dichotomy: that tenacious growth can be positive and that family dysfunction can easily reoccur.

INTRODUCTION

Through art making, I am constantly responding to my environment. The results become self-expression, self-examination, activism, and communication. Since 2007, I have been creating installations both indoors and outdoors with the plant kudzu as the primary material. Initially my response to kudzu came from the sculptural forms it creates outdoors. My interest was further amplified when learning what is taking place beneath the blanket of leafy growth: destruction and damage. Even more alarming, the devastation is almost impossible to prevent. Given time, this plant may completely destroy plant life and objects in its path.

I feel an empathetic relationship to the non-kudzu growth around me. Like it, my own development has been affected by oppression. Another aspect appeals to me on a deeper level: by analyzing characteristics of this plant, I can use those understandings as analogies in my work. In my work kudzu has become a metaphor for my father's abuse and my family's dysfunction. Also relevant was that the vine held a particular aesthetic that enticed the viewer to take notice. Wanting to emphasize linear three-dimensionally, as Patrick Dougherty does in his nest-like sculptures, I began to incorporate this plant into self-expressive work and I became intrigued by the ambiguous and precise way I could use it.

PROCESS: THE GENESIS

At the outset I was reluctant, and I continue to struggle with how much of my story I want to convey. There are two components of concern. First, there is fear disclosure will feel victimizing. Second, I fear when creating art derived from my childhood experiences, the overall effect will fall short of what I want to express. My intention is to confront and address abnormal and destructive behavior. I also want my audience to feel an empathetic relationship to the universal traits of family dysfunction based on their own experiences. In doing that, they are vital component contributing and supporting my concepts. Emphasizing the role of the viewer as it pertains to installation art Julie Reiss states, “the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion to the work” (Reiss). These objectives led me to begin slowly with self-examination, a process with the intention of producing art that uses subtle yet poignant metaphors for abuse.

In one of the early installations, *Existence from Emptiness*, I illustrate the vine’s predisposition as uncontrollable and uncontainable growth by piercing and penetrating surface areas of the ceiling and walls (fig. 1). Influenced by Andy Goldsworthy’s site-specific installations, such as *Roof*, I wanted to produce art where natural materials used in unexpected spaces supported the concept of the work. In *Roof*, giant stone domes fill the room. Some domes, uncontainable by the building, infiltrate the glass windows and complete their shape on the other side. In doing this he is referencing the materials used in the building of the *National Gallery of Art*. Although *Roof* and *Existence* both illustrate

nature's dominance, *Existence* is not reliant on site specificity. I wanted the observer to sense that, although in reality this organic material could never grow from the concrete, it appeared to do so forcefully, penetrating the hardest surfaces.

Wanting to further expound upon the idea of *Existence from Emptiness*, I began *What Grows Here*. Once again referencing kudzu's invasiveness, I "implanted" it along wall surfaces. However, the location of the installation changed from a room to a busy hallway. This site-specific location increased the number of viewers creating a more interactive installation. In this piece I used color to engage those who passed through. Over a year's time I painted the hall and the kudzu vine monochromatically using a different color each time. Along with the color change, I cut back the vine to convey unnatural "growth". Upon the completion of the sixth color, Pepto-Bismol pink, the title of the work changed to *My Family Gallbladder* and divots in the wall began appearing in absence of the vine (fig 2). In *What Grows Here* and *My Family Gallbladder* the use of time is a key component illustrating change and expounding upon ideas like those of artist Michelle Lopez. Emphasizing concerns that initiate her work, she states, "We seem less concerned with death than decay." Using leather to cover objects and encouraging her audience to touch the skin, the leather takes on a history and records the effects of dirt and marks. As time passes, the leather develops a type of used beauty (Weintraub, 387). Similarly, in *What Grows Here* and *My Family Gallbladder*, time is used metaphorically as the work continues to change, recounting aspects of my family's history and the effects of its dysfunction.

In both *Existence from Emptiness* and *My Family Gallbladder* I used characteristics of kudzu to focus on what the vine did and personal content was secondary. Even so, I felt a cathartic contentment and those feelings fueled the work that was to come.



Fig. 1, *Existence from Emptiness*, kudzu, 2008.



Fig. 2, *My Family Gallbladder*, kudzu, 2009.

Although I was satisfied with the oblique conceptual and formal aspects the kudzu contributed to my work, I was avoiding personal aspects that could more precisely convey what I intended. The idea behind, *Existence from Emptiness* and *What Grows Here* was to indirectly express truths about experiences I learned to endure. I looked at the work of Louise Bourgeois who has effectively created art from her childhood experiences, particularly in her installations. She poignantly uses universal, every day objects to convey content in her work. In her 1994 installation, *Red Rooms*, she displays a large red bed as a focal point. Referencing her parents, the bed dominates the room and the color emphasizes “passion or blood” (Bourgeois 236). Erotic objects and an oval mirror confirm this is the room of adults. The placement and the size of the objects uncomfortably confront the viewer. Inspired by this work, I began to consider using personal objects to express content. In doing so, I also began to think more specifically about what I wanted to convey.

Gradually, in my own house and from my mother’s home, I began to assemble objects that belonged to me and three generations of my family. It was extremely important to choose the objects most connected to the individual and, in essence, the ones that represented them. In accord, Walter Benjamin writes, “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (Benjamin 220). Some of the objects belonged to family members I knew well and others were owned by individuals I had come to know through family stories. Taking in to account whom the objects belonged to and their role in my family, I built the stacks of objects as analogies. My grandfather’s constraint over my grandmother was expressed by placing my grandmother’s sewing

stool in his suitcase. The chair my father often used was placed on top of the rug my mother crocheted. A doll my father took from me was laid across his chair. Finally, I placed the kudzu I grew inside my studio in and around these “family stories” allowing it to begin its invasive growth. What evolved was the indoor installation, *Oppression, Suppression*, and although this work felt somewhat satisfying, it seemed unfinished and therefore I came to regard it as a study (fig. 3).



Fig. 3, *Oppression, Suppression*, kudzu and family objects, 2009.

PROCESS: CHALLENGES

In expressing my story, I used objects that felt weak in *Oppression, Suppression*. I wanted to use ones that were inundated with general family history instead of ones associated with a specific experience. I wanted to express the full spectrum and continuum of behavior and cycles I witnessed and experienced in my family. What was more, the objects that represented me needed to hold enough meaning that they became a summary of me within my family system.

Another element I felt was not fully successful was the lack of kudzu growth in the piece. Wanting to emphasize the inexorable nature of the plant, I felt the studio growth was deficient in volume and permanence. Implementing recommendations from campus biologists and a local florist, I made three attempts at growing the plant indoors. Initially, when transplanting the kudzu from outdoors to pots, I dug up roots along the Tuckaseegee River that were crowning on the surface of the ground. When digging around the crowning root systems, I chose a variety of root growths. Some looked like giant carrots with root tendrils shooting in every direction; others reminded me of hairy turnips. Before planting some of them in pots, I used two types of root stimulator. Roots without propellant were stimulated using combinations of fertilizer. A few were planted in dirt alone. Every individual planting and watering step was documented on a label I created for each uniquely sized planter. Once transplanted, the sunlight they were placed in varied. A humidifier was used at least six hours a day to simulate North Carolina humidity. At one point I had over a dozen plants that thrived. Some of the vines grew to

4 feet in length. However, after about three months they each began to die. Suspecting I handled the vine too much trying to manipulate the direction it grew, I was surprised to discover such a hardy plant was so difficult to grow out of its environment.

Understanding its resistance to grow indoors and the plant's fragility in these conditions led to the reinstallation of *Oppression, Suppression*.

PROCESS: BECOMING MORE PRECISE

In the next piece, *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment*, I was intent on becoming more direct in what I wanted to convey. Feelings of vulnerability arose and indicated that I was now working in a more personal way. Once again using the kudzu as a metaphor for family dysfunction, I paired what was left of the plant grown inside the studio with objects that were saturated with personal meaning and a deeper meaning emerged (fig. 4). I began to understand the words of postmodern sculptor Eva Hesse. After completing the sculpture, *Hang-Up*, she stated, “[Hang-Up] has a kind of depth I don’t always achieve and that is the kind of depth or soul or absurdity of life or meaning or feeling or intellect that I want to get” (Kleiner 1086).

I made a second trip to my mother’s home in Arkansas to gather more family objects and retrieved a breakfast table that has been in my immediate family for over thirty years. It had once belonged to my great-grandmother and it is estimated to be over one-hundred years old. After stripping and varnishing it, my parents began using it as a table when I was around twelve years old. Despite my family’s constant moves, the table always reappeared when we lived in a house, and although it was utilitarian, it represents much more to me. Termed “emotional triggers” by author Claire Bishop in her book *Installation Art*, objects like our family table have the ability to describe an event (Bishop 39). It was at this table my brother and I endured what seemed like endless hours of my father’s abuse. He did not allow us to leave the table or show any emotional distress, and if we did, we were punished. In order to protect myself, I would suppress crying by

drinking water, glasses and glasses of water. My father was unaware of what I was doing and so this tactic enabled me to endure these events. In my installation, *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment*, the multiple drinking glasses filled to brim with water represents the way I detached from the situation.



Fig. 4, *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment*, kudzu and family objects, 2009.

PROCESS: DEVELOPMENT

Although the content in my work is specific to me, the effect on and response of viewers was and continues to be both remarkable and gratifying. My audience dispels my fears of vulnerability by expressions of understanding and empathy. Though most of the audience is unaware of the explicit content that motivates the assemblage of this piece, people often share personal stories with me as they relate it to my work. Although their stories are individual and unique, we share a common resonance. The connection between my work and the viewer invites a dialogue about a subject to one degree or another, we have all experienced. Countless individual conversations with viewers helped me to realize the breadth and degree of dysfunction. Further emphasizing the relationship between the viewer and the art, artist Marcel Duchamp stated, “The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act”(Preble, 32). What evolved from *Existence from Emptiness* and *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment*, were the installation and study, *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth*, documented since May 2009 and a major part of my thesis exhibition.

RESULTING WORK

After clearing a twenty-foot by twenty-foot kudzu infested hillside I installed *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth* in Sylva, North Carolina on May 4, 2009. The focus in this installation is still the table inundated with over-filled glasses of water. However, other objects layered with personal meaning are implemented, each representing cycles and stories of my family. Though the glasses refer to the particulars of my own story, each stack represents all abused children (fig. 5).

As the installation and study grew in size and content, so did its environment. After three failed attempts at growing kudzu in my studio (see “Challenges”), *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth*, was installed in an environment ideal to the plant’s growth and proliferation. Inspired by Mel Chin’s, *Revival Field*, where the installation site informs his work, the effects of the climate and damage from the kudzu on the objects further developed and changed my work. However, in contrast Chin’s objective is to remove toxins from a specific site. When discussing *Revival Field* with him during his Visiting Scholar residency at *Western Carolina University*, he spoke of eliminating the poisons in the dirt by using the analogy of a sculptor removing unwanted materials. Unlike Chin’s site-specific work, I chose a location solely based on the contribution of abundant kudzu growth. In writing, *Notes on Site Specificity*, Miwon Kwon describes these sites as functional to the artwork in its “environmental context” (Kocur 33, 39).



Fig. 5, *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth*, kudzu and family objects, 2009.

CONCLUSION: THESIS EXHIBITION

At the completion of my study, specific aspects of *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth* were relocated at *The Fine Art Museum* located at *Western Carolina University*, for my thesis exhibition. Three components were essential in order to convey a comprehensive investigation.

On one side of the gallery, eighteen 12X17 photographic images taken June 4, 2009 through January 11, 2010 hang (fig. 6). In photographically documenting the installation over the past nine months, it changed with the seasons. Each month the continual damage to the objects metaphorically developed and emphasized the effects of my family's dysfunction. One to three images selected, from each visit to the installation site over the past nine months, are displayed in chronological order. They document changes that occurred after each visit. Some images include the entire installation where others give only details.



Fig. 6, *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth*, MFA Installation, 2010

In the center of the room, what is left of the table stands alone. Although the history of the table is essential, I am relying on the narrative in the photographs to communicate this concept. It is the rings imprinted on the table that I am more interested in displaying (fig. 7). The residue from the glasses, representing the results of my detachment from abuse, is the focus.



Fig. 7, *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth*, MFA Installation, 2010

The last component to the exhibition is a three-dimensional “drawing” using dead kudzu vine collected from the original installation site and the surrounding area. When creating the wall sculpture, I used the 31x22 foot wall opposing the photographs (fig. 8). Metaphorically, this piece is illustrating a dichotomy: that tenacious growth can be positive and that family dysfunction can easily reoccur (Bishop 115).



Fig. 8, *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth*, MFA Installation, 2010

Within the boundaries of the museum, the exhibition illustrates results and discoveries from *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth*. After relocating the installation for the final time into the gallery, I agree with the words of Kwon when referencing Renee Green's traveling exhibition, where it is possible to find "...new meaning and gain critical sharpness through recontextualizations" (Kocur 45). The results of my study led me to discover my own resilience and fortitude when challenged with the history of my childhood. Perhaps more importantly, this decisive awareness assures me the cycle of dysfunction in my life continues to resolve itself.

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APPENDIX

List of Compact Disc

1. *Existence from Emptiness*, kudzu, 2008
2. *My Family Gallbladder*, kudzu, 2009
3. *Oppression, Suppression*, kudzu and family objects, 2009
4. *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment*, kudzu and family objects, 2009
5. *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth*, kudzu and family objects, 2009
6. *Oppression, Suppression, Detachment, Growth*, MFA Installation, 2010
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