

PERSONAL ARCHAEOLOGY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ILLUMINATION OF
A LATE-BLOOMING FEMINIST ARTIST

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education
with a Concentration in Art

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March 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members and director for their assistance and support. In particular, I appreciate the patience and guidance of Erin Tapley as my advisor for four years in my degree-seeking quest. I thank Seth McCormick for helping me leap into the twenty-first century in my understanding of contemporary art. I appreciate Kevin Kirkpatrick for his kind and collaborative approach to critiques and for his suggestions of artists to discover during my studio experiences with him.

I also extend sincere gratitude to my colleague and ride-sharing friend, Dawn Gilchrist-Young, who is the deserving recipient of the 2011 Norman Mailer Writing Award for High School Teachers. By listening to my ideas and sharing our childhood memories during our daily drive, she validated me and encouraged me to find my unique voice. On a practical note, she gave me valuable writing feedback and helped me cite my sources properly.

I offer my respect and love to my mother, my grandmother, my sisters, my niece, and my talented women teacher-friends at Swain County High School for their devotion and resilience, despite hardships.

Lastly, I thank my patient and loving husband, Galen May. With his unwavering support, I am blooming.

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ABSTRACT

PERSONAL ARCHAEOLOGY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ILLUMINATION OF A LATE-BLOOMING FEMINIST ARTIST

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Originally seeking personal healing and restoration of balance in life through artistic expression and the creative process, I am enlightened by female precedents and empowered by their work and my own process. An aesthetic sisterhood with a twelfth century visionary, Hildegard of Bingen, informs the content and composition of my art work and provides a model of feminine power. Some connections relating Hildegard's writings and circular compositions in her illuminations to contemporary global ecumenical, ecological, and feminist understandings are explored. Through Judy Chicago's writings about *The Dinner Party* and Paula Harper's history of the founding of the *First Feminine Art Program*, I discover a connection to the broader culture and the feminist movement, realizing that my own struggles with weight and body-image are related to the subordination of women in a male dominant culture.

The resulting exhibition of art work is in three sections. The first part consists of five large works of construction-grade wall compound applied to plywood panels, imprinted with natural objects as well as patterned and textured materials found in "typical" women's work. Embedded in the compound are images and messages cut from

my food packaging. Paint and stain are added to the surfaces. The second phase of art work is a set of three life-size pastel drawings on brown butcher paper exploring my distorted perception of body image making use of the creative therapy of body-outline drawing. Finally, a triptych of mixed media collages, also life-sized and on various papers, explores the concept of “You Are What You Eat” by using personal food packaging to create images of anatomical systems, again using my actual body outline and the circle.

Through autoethnography, a form of arts-based research, I discover that I am a microcosm of the macrocosm of present-day woman’s obsession with dieting and body image and I seek to offer personal insights to challenge outdated beliefs and stereotypes. Further, I come to believe that women’s weight and body-image struggles are rooted in the logical, analytical, linear thinking and design of the dominant culture which is hindering the attainment of gender equality. By allowing myself to consider a personal cosmology inspired by “Other” and pre-patriarchal worldviews, I embrace a cyclical notion of time and a more holistic daily existence. I achieve a sense of balance and empowerment and hope to share this illumination through the exhibition of my art and through my writing and teaching.

The artist, researcher, and teacher are roles through which there are implications for further inquiry. Future directions for my art practice include three-dimensional, tape-cast body outlines of self and the use of wall compound as a way of casting positive relief imagery into paper-pulp and clay. Research avenues include ecological concerns in art with particular interest in sustainability--using trash and recycling in place of more traditional art materials. Directions of inquiry for the teacher include designing units to

encourage problem-solving and discovery using unconventional, no or low cost materials such as personal trash. More in-depth study of Hildegard of Bingen's prescriptive uses of plants and other natural objects for balance and healing is of interest. New insights into the differences between the dominant, patriarchal structure of school and the classroom will help me as the teacher to be sensitive to and accommodate the feminine, Native (as one third of my students are members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), and all "Other" cultural values when they conflict. Also, encouragement to young women to research and use historical precedents in their own art work will help empower them and make progress toward gender equality. Lastly, communicating that the creation of art can be a therapeutic practice for individuals and communities is of value.

INTRODUCTION: GETTING THERE

I am struggling with the form of this thesis. I felt a similar inner-conflict as I began to consider working on my master's degree in 2008. I was to submit images of my own art work as part of the admissions process. I realized that although I had taught art for many of the thirty years since receiving my bachelor's degree in art education, I had not developed a meaningful body of work. My "samples" were mainly images of works I had done as demonstrations of techniques for my high school classes, or they were images of works I had done to give as gifts. The intent was always rooted in meeting someone else's needs. I was being asked to consider myself an artist and to create work of some significance. I was intimidated and elated at the same time. I even considered approaching the thesis from a purely pedagogical stance to avoid the challenge. Somehow, to spend time and energy on my own work had seemed too selfish before. I had lived my life doing the "have-tos" before the "want-tos." *All good girls put the needs of others before their own* (Orbach 9). *My turn.*

The over-choice of possibility was the next battle. Would I create work in a traditional and representational manner? I am skilled at observing and depicting the world as I see it in drawing and painting. Would I go with a study that is unlike what I have done before? What would be the impetus of my own body of work? I considered studying a specific location over time (Exit 83 into Sylva from Highway 74 East) and recording the changes in photographs, art, and in painstaking notes and statistics so that I could link art and science procedures. After all, data collection is increasingly valued in

education, as I had been studying in education courses. I considered creating personalized portraits of current students and having an exhibit at my school, writing about how the portraits may have affected the students' self-perceptions and life-choices, especially whether or not to stay in school. I was very interested in the possible effects of art and the high school drop out rate. Both of those proposals would have been fine, acceptable, and valid. However, both were more based on intellect than feeling. I knew I needed to be more subjective about my art at this point. After acceptance into the master's program at Western Carolina University and after two years of taking the education requirements of the degree, I had to decide what my own personal artistic focus for my thesis and exhibition would be. I kept coming back to these questions: What had I spent disproportionate time and energy thinking about over my lifetime? What struggle in my life was consuming more of me than I was willing to give any longer? Where was I feeling the greatest imbalance?

I decided to tackle my personal issues with food, dieting, and body image in my art work. In addition to creating personally meaningful work, maybe I could find comfort, self-healing, and some measure of peace as related to this lifelong struggle. "Health care researchers, special education researchers, psychologists, and others have increasingly turned to the arts for their therapeutic, restorative, and empowering qualities" (Leavy 9). I spent a year developing a process, creating products, and finding peace and empowerment through my art.

Now, my good-girl-student-self tells me a written thesis should be an objective, logical, linear, analysis of one aspect of my art work. Yet I rebel. I want it to be messy—deeply personal, emotional, fluid, holistic, and creative. I read from several arts-based

research sources and decide that autoethnography is the path for me. “From my reviews of the genre of arts and research (S. Finley, 2003; see also S. Finley 2005) its most salient features include that arts-based research makes use of emotive, affective experiences, senses, and bodies, and imagination and emotion as well as intellect, as ways of knowing and responding to the world...” (S. Finley in Knowles, Cole 72). “Autoethnography refers to the process as well as the product of writing about the personal and its relationship to culture” (K.Scott-Hoy and C.Ellis in Knowles and Cole, 130). “In line with autoethnography, arts-based researchers include the artist’s subjectivity and present their work as embodied inquiry: sensuous, emotional, complex, intimate. They expect their projects to evoke response, inspire imagination, give pause for new possibilities and new meanings, and open new questions and avenues with inquiry (Bochner & Ellis, 2003 from K.Scott-Hoy and C.Ellis in Knowles and Cole, 135). These readings and my own art experience give me the confidence and permission to write the way I feel and think as a female, not structuring my thoughts to fit a form and process dictated by a hegemonic expectation.

I was almost three years old. I was hiding under the dining room table as the afternoon light made bold patterns of shadows onto the floor and across my arm. My mother, who had recently given birth to the third of four daughters, and my Aunt Lois were sitting at the table talking to my grandmother, Nanny, my father’s mother. My mother had a knot and bruise over her right eye, and a dark purple-red circle of drained blood under that eye. Her top lip was swollen and split and drooping on one side, overlapping her bottom lip. She looked disfigured in the strong light and from my low vantage point. Her eyes were tearing up. The three women were discussing where my

father would spend the night when he was released from jail this time. “They” would let him out when he sobered up. Nanny said he could come to her house for a while again. Then she said this: “If only he had a son.”

Certainly at this early age I did not understand fully what this meant, but over the years as I recalled this utterance, the meaning and the ramifications of that statement were illuminated. Somehow it came to mean that my being a girl was what made my father drink and beat my mother. Fifty-two years later, I would see this as my first awareness of being “The Other” (Chadwick 13) in a patriarchal society.

In the dysfunction of my family of origin, normal expressions of love were not allowed. My mother, for fear of jealous retaliation from my house-painter father, did not feel free to hug and kiss and say “I love you” to her daughters. Instead, she fed us. “Food is love” is an underlying message that has hampered the development of a healthy relationship with food over my lifetime (Buckroyd 26).

Over many decades I have sought to escape the fear and anxiety of those early years by using food as a comfort and compulsive eating as a way to numb the hurt. The obsession with food, body image, and weight loss in the media fueled my dysfunction. Advertising and packaging of food reinforced these fallacies. I have spent many years eating for comfort, restricting my food to try to gain some measure of control, rejecting my body because it was female or not perfect female (Orbach 54) and denying its real shape and size. I have sought healing through individual cognitive behavior therapy, twelve-step group membership and mentoring, reading countless self-help and healing books and doing workbooks, and journaling, with alternating periods of sheer denial that there was any problem at all. My inner battle with food felt like a struggle for my soul.

To put it in spiritual terms, was I worshipping a false god, or was I wrestling with demons? Could personifying the battle in this way and working through the conflict in my art work eventually bring clarity or balance? I am ready to call a truce, seeking some unity and wholeness through my art and the creative process.

Although much of my childhood was spent in fear and angst over what would happen next and how I would survive, it is also from early memories that I have some idea of how to escape the bad and feel the good.

In my backyard at 2705 Dellrose Avenue in a working-class suburb of Richmond, Virginia, I played alone or alongside my sisters. I could become fully immersed in sensory perceptions. I made designs with sticks and rocks in the dirt, often in circular formations. My earliest memory is of squinting my teary eyes to make the sunlight turn into a corona of rays. I dissected flowers and placed the parts in categories on the wooden bench and arranged them in balance on the surfaces of the toy tin dish set. I peeled the paint to make designs that looked like land masses I had seen in the atlas. I made chains of clover flowers to wear around my neck and to give my imaginary friends. When my attention was so focused on creating something new and personal from what existed in my everyday surroundings, I was in another world, a separate but distinct reality. I hummed melodies just to feel the vibrations and to move in rhythm with the June bugs and honey bees and wind. The fear from past and worry of impending traumas vanished.

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

Sometime in the mid-nineteen-nineties, I heard a National Public Radio show that played the music of a twelfth century nun who was described as an artistic late-bloomer. I was in my forties then, and was immediately encouraged by the idea that it was not too late for me to create. I felt a connection, *a resonance*--a term used to describe this kind of connection by Sir Ken Robinson, author of the book *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Almost Everything*. (I was privileged to hear Sir Ken deliver the keynote address at the Association of Career and Technical Education conference in St. Louis on November 16, 2011.) Hearing Hildegard's music put me in a state of calm that I wanted to be able to experience again and again. I purchased the audiotape entitled "Vision."

For several years I knew very little else about Hildegard of Bingen, but when I saw a photograph of a place setting at Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* devoted to Hildegard, I decided to read more about her. Some biographical information supports her status as a rare woman of power in history and particularly in the twelfth century. In 1098, Hildegard was born the last child of a noble couple near the small village of Alzey, Germany. As was tradition for a tenth child, her parents gave her as a tithe to the church when she was eight years old. She was placed in the care of a Benedictine abbess named Jutta. Although sickly as a child, probably suffering from migraines, she was educated and trained by the elder abbess and assumed the leadership of the community upon Jutta's death (Chadwick 58-62). It would be an anachronism to call her a Renaissance

woman, but Hildegard was gifted and productive in many ways. She wrote books inspiring the rejuvenation of a more personal spiritual life, espousing creation theology, and guides to natural health and healing. She was composer of sixty-three hymns and is thought to be the playwright of the first miracle play. Her visions and books reflect her knowledge of the science of her times. Her writing of *The Scivias* (1142-52) or *Know the Ways of the Lord*, a visionary book of knowledge, made her a pioneer of visual autobiography (Chadwick 46). I am most inspired by the words of Hildegard herself in her opening of *The Scivias*: “And behold! In my forty-third year I had a heavenly vision...I saw a great light from which a heavenly voice said to me: ‘O, puny creature, ashes of ashes and dust of dust, tell and write what you see and hear.’” Hildegard claimed to be a weak vessel through which God spoke, circumventing the challenge of patriarchal authority (Chadwick 59). After receiving this call to write, she refused out of humility, not stubbornness, but then was stricken with illness. When she did begin writing and sharing her visions she left her sickbed and was healed (Hildegard, *Scivias* 60). This inspires me to think that it is not too late for me to make art, sharing what I have experienced and learned, and through creating and sharing to have hope for healing for myself and generations of women who experience the same struggle with food and body image.

Hildegard’s legacy is explained by scholar and author Matthew Fox. In his book *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*, he uses contemporary cultural terms to describe the ways that Hildegard is relevant to our times. He refers to these as her eight gifts to us.

1) Hildegard questioned patriarchal culture (15-18). She did so from her stance as “weak vessel” and was able to write and speak freely to church and political leaders including

the pope. She is the first Christian thinker to deal positively and seriously with the idea of the feminine, according to scholar Barbara Newman (Chadwick 61).

2) She brought together art, science, and religion (Fox 18-19). Through her creation theology, she saw the divine in nature. Her book *Physica* is her classic text on health and healing through balancing the humors with remedies from the natural world. “She demonstrated that the missing link between science and spirituality is art” (18).

3) She explored psychology “not only in terms of ego problems but in relating microcosm to macrocosm. She saw the human body and psyche as creation in miniature.” 4) She showed that art is the way of healing the psyche and the cosmos, especially through her mandalas. “Mandalas liberate the consciousness” (20) and “return us to primeval consciousness which is fundamentally one of unity” (38). 5) Her works “foreshadowed global religious ecumenism” through which we can now see connection to Native American, as well as Hindu and Buddhist beliefs (39). 6) She was prophetic, provoking the privileged and disturbing the comfortable, naming justice the primary struggle of creation (45). 7) She advocated an ecological awakening (26). 8) She challenged theological and educational methodologies with pictures or visions first, followed by words (27). In Patricia Leavy’s work, *Method Meets Art*, A/R/T is defined as the integrated roles of artist, researcher, and teacher. Hildegard’s work becomes my model for A/R/Tographical methodology. (Leavy 3) Her works position her as one of the earliest arts-based researchers, starting with images from her visions and following with words. According to Pinar citation in Leavy’s *Method Meets Art*, “A/R/T is a metaphor for artist-researcher, teacher—three roles integrated creating a third space.” A/R/Tography merges “knowing, doing, and making”(9).

THE CIRCLE

I squint my salt-water-filled eyes to the sky

The rays reach out from center

Radiating in all directions

360 degrees, 365 days

Tight, more light

Control and magic

Making that vision happen at will

The burden is lighter,

The outlook brighter than it was before.

One birthday wish

A Spirograph toy

Pure joy

Placing one plastic wheel inside the geared opening of another

Gripping ballpoint pen

Twirling it in rhythm with my heart

I call it Art.

Oily ink layers of overlapping colors

Become intricate designs.

With furrowed brow

I lose count of how many times

The refrigerator door opens

How many shots of liquor my father downs--

A reprieve from tallying sounds.

The circle is my personal savior.

It is the moon, the sun, the stars,

My breasts are circles inside of circles inside of circles

My plate

My pregnant belly

My wedding ring

The eye of God,

And my eyes as well.

My eyes

Mine eyes

“Mine eyes have seen the glory...”

In the rings of the felled tree

You see its life history.

MY WORK

My exhibition of art work is in three sections. The first part consists of five large works of construction-grade wall compound applied to plywood panels, imprinted with natural objects as well as patterned and textured materials found in “typical” women’s work. “The materials used were not the traditional ones of fine art but the ordinary substances that women habitually work with in their private lives-fabrics, makeup, furniture, food, threads, and yarns,” wrote Paula Harper about the work by the women of the Feminist Art Program (Harper 772). Embedded in the compound are images and messages cut from my food packaging. Paint and stain are added to the surfaces. The second phase of art work is a set of three life-size pastel drawings on brown butcher paper exploring my distorted perception of body image making use of the creative therapy of body-outline drawing (Brooke 83-94). Finally a triptych of mixed media collages, also life-size and on various papers, explores the concept of “You Are What You Eat” by using personal food packaging to create images of anatomical systems, again using my actual body outline and the circle.

The Paintings

The compositions for my works of art from the fall of 2010 painting semester are based on illuminations of five of Hildegard’s visions. I can not explain the mimicking of the compositions in any better way than to compare this to author Hunter S. Thompson’s

acts of typing novels by famous authors. The following is an excerpt from an interview with William McKeen in 1990 reprinted in *Conversations With Hunter S. Thompson*:

WM: You spent some of your time at Time, Inc., typing works of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and other great American writers in an effort to understand their style.

What writers have had the greatest influence on you?

HST: I would type things. I'm very much into rhythm—writing in a musical sense. I like gibberish, if it sings. Every author is different—short sentences, long, no commas, many commas. It helps a lot to understand what you are doing. You're writing, and so were they. It won't fit often—that is, *your* hands don't want to do *their* words—but you're *learning* (Twayne 93).

The self-imposed rules and guidelines for making these paintings are based on my desire to be resourceful—to use what I already have around me without spending money and using any more of the earth's resources. I seek to integrate my process and art-making with my everyday life. I want to show that there are enough raw materials available to me without having to consume any more than I already do. I especially want to save and re-use my personal food packaging so I can start to literally come to terms with the amount of it and I want to face the actuality of what I eat. Personally, I have suffered from denial about what I eat, but society also suffers from denial about the refuse it creates. New York City Department of Sanitation's anthropologist-in-residence, Robin Nagle, describes our culture's relationship with trash as a cognitive problem. He describes trash as highly visible and constant, and yet it is invisibilized. In an interview with Patrick James, Senior Editor of *TheBeliever*, on September 3, 2010, Nagle asks,

“What is the mental process where we invisibilize something that is present all the time? Why have we found ourselves implicated in a system that not only generates so much trash, but relies on the accelerating production of waste for its perpetuation? Why is that OK?” He also stated, “Every single thing you see is future trash. Everything. So we are surrounded by ephemera, but we can’t acknowledge that, because it’s kind of scary, because I think ultimately it points to our own temporariness, to thoughts that we are all going to die.” I want to work through this denial of responsibility for trash as well as the denial of what I actually eat on a personal level, and in so doing be a model for a cultural ecological awakening, as encouraged by Hildegard. Also in this way, I serve as a microcosm of the macrocosm of taking responsibility for stewardship of my own body and of the planet.

I use my trash and recycling as raw material as well as for text and image sources. The labels on the packaging are meaningful to me as I purchase some items based on their promises for health and well-being, and their nutritional values. Some messages on food packaging are deceptive and conniving, although superficially appear to be wise and helpful. To a compulsive over-eater such as me, emotional eating for solace makes us think that food is our friend, and some of the messages encourage that delusion. Thus, I use food packaging for words, colors, and shapes, especially circles as symbols for the feminine, and I use materials and tools that are already in my house and garage. The surfaces on which I work are used or scrap plywood left from household remodeling and projects. The bulk of a five-gallon bucket of joint compound was left from wall repair in my house, and latex wall paints and stains were left-over from interior and exterior house painting projects. Occasionally, in my process I need a concentrated

color, so I use a tube of artist acrylics that I have from my sporadic dabbling in representational painting over my twenty-four year career as an art educator.

The space my recycling collection requires grows rapidly. I have to figure out how to manage this growing quantity of raw materials. Prior to saving for my art, when I had collected a few bags of it, I sorted it just enough to fulfill the simple requirements of the local recycling center: cardboard and mixed containers. I have to sort into more categories now, based on materials and size and shape. Like shapes and sizes stacked one inside the other take up much less space. So I now have categories of small, medium, and large round plastic containers as well as small, medium and large tin cans. All plastic wrappers and bags are put in one large plastic bag with air squeezed out. Cardboard boxes are broken down and flattened and filed in one large storage box. Glass containers are sorted out of the collection and still delivered to the community recycling center monthly, except for a few that are used for water and brush cleaning. Styrofoam meat trays and egg cartons are in another box. I also divide the recycling into two broad divisions: items I use as materials in my art and items I use as tools for making the art. Lids, cardboard, and labels from cans were imbedded in the work. Plastic bottles, containers, and styrofoam trays became mixing, storing, application and texturing tools. I am fascinated with the shiny aluminum foil lids from yogurt, my daily lunch staple, and the mylar seals from coffee cans. The metallic circles are like the halos of Byzantine icons for me and elevate the status of trash to a suggestion of precious metal. They also are the moon as it corresponds to the rhythms of a woman's menstrual cycle.

The main rule, in brief: No buying, use what I have. Insights: the organizing is part of the art-making process. Seeing my trash makes me confront and start to come to terms with my eating and food buying habits.



Figure 1. Recycling Center. Installation of painted desk with sorted personal trash.

The Process

In the basement room of my house where I am storing the bulk of my recycling, I place my large piece of plywood on the flat surface of an antique teacher's desk protected by a large black plastic garbage bag. I put my earphones in so I can listen to Hildegard of Bingen's music on my I-Pod. I place the image of one of Hildegard's illuminations that I want to inspire composition nearby. I scoop out a large dollop of the white joint compound using a large plastic kitchen spoon and spread it onto the surface of the plywood like icing on a sheet cake. I go out into my yard seeking natural objects that appeal to me. I take pruning shears to help me cut branches. I am particularly drawn to aging, drying stems, leaves and spent seed pods, maybe because they are in the same

phase of life as me. Cedar, rosemary, basil, and lavender bring not only texture but aroma to the process. I bring my collection of natural objects into the studio and set them next to the coated plywood. Also within reach, I have a variety of refuse lids, labels, and food packaging images. My rudimentary compass is a nail tapped into the center holding a piece of twine from packaging tied to a pencil. With it, I make a circle in the joint compound. I arrange the natural objects, referring to elements and composition of the Hildegard illuminated vision. I embed selected images and objects from my recycling; usually the meaning is subjectively or subconsciously chosen. Several days later, when the compound is thoroughly cured, I remove the wilted plants and texture-producing objects like plastic netting, and I coat the work with a layer of clear polyurethane to seal the compound and preserve the detail through the next stages. Then, I paint and stain the textured surface. I work in rhythm and response to Hildegard's music in my ear. I am not just doing yard work or house work or art work, but all three at once. I am joyful and fulfilled, I am inspired. I feel fully immersed in the moment and the process. It is fully physical and sensory and somehow ethereal. I am at peace and happy. It is not medicinal or magical, but it feels like healing.

The first painting is based on Hildegard's illumination entitled "The Human as Microcosm of the Macrocosm" and is plate six in Matthew Fox's *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*. My title is "There is Die in Diet and Di in Digestion," an excerpt from writings from the "Internal Scroll" performance by Carolee Schneeman on September 4, 1977, in Telluride, Colorado (Schneeman 238-239). This forty-eight inch tall by thirty-four inch wide piece is composed using a twenty-eight-and-a-half inch circle with a stylized full-figured female in the center, reminiscent of da Vinci's "Vitruvian

Man.” The female figure is a symbol of Woman, but is also based on my guess about my own shape and size at the time. The border from the top of the circle to the edge of the piece is eight and a half inches. The lower border is eleven inches. There are twenty-two smaller circles placed regularly around the inner boundary of the large circle. They mark time, like on a clock, and are cut from Caffeine-Free Diet Coke twelve-pack cartons. Phases of the moon and menstrual regularity are messages. Although I struggle with cutting these circles rather than just using pre-existing lids, I want to use just small pieces of the words on the carton. I know the universally recognized red Coke logo will be inferred and the word “Diet” in bold black will stand out. I like the gold and silver as hints of precious metals. I embed the large fern leaf across the circle, knowing that the later painting of the symbolic woman will be obscured by it, symbolizing the shame of revealing my fat, naked self, and being like the fig leaf used by Eve to hide herself as she ran from The Garden of Eden. The color of the background is an earthy brown, the color of natural aging and decay. The bright red acrylic paint used to stain the outer circumference of the circle represents blood. The circle is the opening of birth. The other imprints of plants from my yard are like fossils unearthed at an archaeological dig site. Randomly placed outside of the main circle are some other food packaging remnants. There is the word “sugar” and the opposite, “no sugar added.” This represents one of the food battles I have struggled with for most of my life. In Geneen Roth’s *Women, Food, and God*, she classifies compulsive eaters as either “restrictors or permitters” (Roth 153). I realize that I am the former, restricting my intake of calories by choosing “lite,” “reduced,” “non,” “low,” or “no” sugar and fat food options. This limited taste and the pleasure of eating as well. After being “good” for days, eating only

limited portions of aforementioned foods, I would binge and eat larger portions of “bad,” tasty, fat and sugar-laden treats. Thus the cycle of restricting followed by bingeing occurred rhythmically for most of my life.

There is a label from “Diced Mustard Greens,” using “Di” in a way other than Diet, and repeats the excerpt from Carolee Schneeman’s *Internal Scroll*. In addition, the flat and vibrant mass-produced vegetable imagery on the label is juxtaposed with the real, natural vegetation imprints. Which is “real?” Finally, a philosophical message from a yogurt lid offers wisdom. “Little acts of kindness add up to a lifetime of happiness.” With product messages like this, who needs the Dalai Lama? Is this message meant to nurture my soul or to keep me, as a woman, obsessing over food and my duty to nurture others?



Figure 2. There is Die in Diet and Di in Digestion. In honor of Carolee Schneeman. 48”h x 34”w. Stained wall compound over plywood, embedded natural objects and food packaging.

The second painting is based on Hildegard’s illumination of her vision “Cultivating the Cosmic Tree” from plate 7 of Fox’s book. This time the thirty-inch circle is divided into quadrants—seasons, directions. The tree is a celebration of the birth of wisdom that comes through creativity, and we humans cultivate it, according to Hildegard (Fox 69). The outer boundary of the circle is rope-like and is a symbol of the

bondage of my struggle with food and weight. The wavy inner boundary is created by running a hair comb, an everyday tool of woman's beautification, through the joint compound. The center circle is made by pressing a coffee can seal into the wet compound and removing it when dry. The quadrants are painted with pure acrylic colors, diluted to behave as a stain, then wiped away to leave the concentrated color emphasizing the details of the imprinted plants. The plants are branches and stems representing the whole tree, and actually representing all trees on the planet. In this way, each plant print is a microcosm of the macrocosm of nature and life once again. The area outside of the circle is deep red. The textures are worn away more, and the surface is stained in a deeper, dried red-brown blood color. In the Hildegard illumination, there are images of little creatures and serpents around the periphery of the circle breathing the moisture of life into the inner circle. In their places, I put good food/bad food images: beans, sandwich on whole wheat bread, no-sugar-added ice cream sandwiches. Although the composition is overall flat and symbolic, only these items hint at real representational space and perspective. The compulsive eater struggle of what to eat and what not to eat is illustrated in the food images, but is metaphorically expressed in the battle of the eye to see this piece as flat and symbolic versus depth of space of the three-dimensional packaging image angles.

This piece visually relates to the medicine wheel of Native American cultures and most obviously illustrates Hildegard's foreshadowing of global religious ecumenism. It was through creating this piece that I became aware of the beginning of a paradigm shift in my own way of thinking some years ago. I attended a week-long institute for educators at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in June 23-27, 2003. *Face to Face with*

the First Peoples of America coincided with the museum's first major exhibition of Native American Art, "Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum." The survey lecturer for the week was Dr. Danielle Moretti-Langholz, American Indian Resource Center Director, and member of the College of William and Mary Anthropology Department. In her condensed overview of American Indian history and culture, I learned some basic and for me, life-changing ideas. It was from her that I learned that Native cosmology is very different from Western cultural worldviews. In collective cultures the individual's behavior impacts the group, and the group impacts the universe. In many cultures, time is viewed as a circle rather than a line. Many societies are matrilineal clan-based. During the same week of study, Dr. James Farmer, Art History Department Chair at Virginia Commonwealth University, shared his knowledge of the conflicting aesthetics of Native and non-Native peoples. Since there is no separate, distinct word for "art" in Native languages, Europeans erroneously assumed Native peoples had no art and relegated their work to the category of "artifacts." The Native aesthetic was that *purpose* was necessary in order for an object to have value. The purposes of art could be utilitarian, intermediary, or *transformative*. Awareness of my own narrow, biased, Western thought occurred and I realized that the worldview I had espoused was just one of many ways look at time, art, and even societal structure. In particular, the idea of time as a circle made so much more sense to me, and matrilineal societal structure inspired my imagination to dream of a time when women would be appreciated and empowered. Could pre-patriarchal cosmology be a model for post-patriarchal life? I write briefly and broadly on this topic, in appreciation and wonder of the possibilities. In no way do I intend to appropriate Native culture and beliefs. In

homage to Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, contemporary American Indian female artist, whom I heard speak at the North Carolina Art Education Association Conference in Asheville in November of 2008, I name this painting “Georgia On My Mind, Too.”

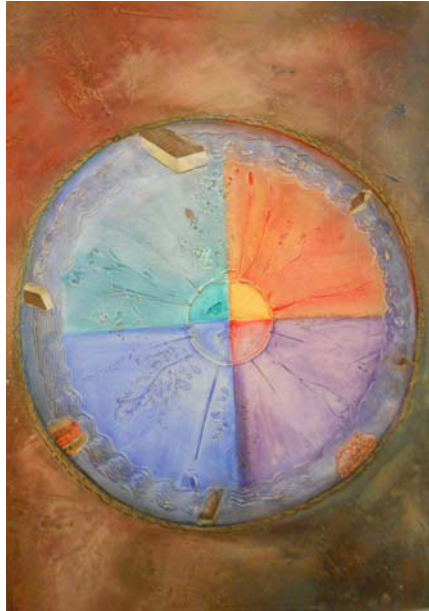


Figure 3. Georgia on My Mind, Too. In honor of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. 8”h x 34”w. Stained wall compound over plywood, embedded natural objects and food packaging.

Painting three is based on Hildegard’s illumination on plate 15 in Fox’s book, entitled “All Beings Celebrate Creation.” The piece is on a rectangular board forty-nine and a half inches tall by thirty inches wide. There is a forty-inch diameter circle that is centered and extends beyond the rectangle. The circle is mounted on a Lazy Susan (Where, oh where, did that name come from?) apparatus and is thus a free-moving wheel, inviting the viewer to interact by touching and spinning. The large circle in Hildegard’s work has nine concentric circles symbolizing nine choirs of angels. The outer circles have wings and angel faces while the inner circles look human. Thus all beings, humans and angels, celebrate together. In my work, I choose to create the angel and human symbols with metal and metallic food container lids as in earlier works. The viewer’s countenance is mirrored in the reflective surfaces and thus becomes one of the jubilant

beings. Are you human or angelic? Again these circles make reference to the halos of Byzantine icons. In addition to imprinting images from natural plants, I use twine to create a textured line. I have placed the messages from sour cream and yogurt packaging equidistant in the third circle from center. These messages read, “Greek yogurt—more protein, better, healthier option.” “Jumping for joy is good exercise.” “The most precious thing one can make is a friend.” “A smile can start a conversation without saying a word.” The last three messages are brought to you by “Fresh thinking from Daisy,” a part-skim, low fat sour cream. I glazed the background with gold to harken back to Medieval Christian imagery. In honor of Frida Kahlo, I call this work “I Hope the End is Joyful, and I Hope Never to Return,” her last journal entry before dying (<http://www.fridakahlo.com/>).



Figure 4. I Hope the End is Joyful, and I Hope Never to Return. In honor of Frida Kahlo. 49.5”h x 40”w. Stained wall compound over plywood, embedded natural objects and food packaging.

In my fourth painting I make compositional reference to Hildegard’s illumination entitled “The Six Days of Creation Renewed” from plate 13 of Fox’s book. In Hildegard’s vision, the dark area symbolizes death and the mandala is the living eye of God. The six smaller circles are the six days of creation. For me, the plywood board that is the basis of this piece is weathered and warped as it had been stored outside. The

landscape implied is ethereal. The blue of the sky over the rough wood creates a cognitive dissonance. Sapphire blue for Hildegard represents compassion, so I adopt that meaning as well. My printed image of the leafy branch represents the biosphere and the gold printed circles are spiritual beings. The flame-like hand is healing power. I have placed the lid of another product at the bottom of this piece. It reads, “National Breast Cancer Foundation.” Although it may appear generous and compassionate for companies to market their products using breast cancer awareness and other women’s health issue promotions, I feel it is sinister and exploitive. While I was working on this piece, my elder sister was undergoing daily radiation treatments following the surgical removal of a breast tumor. She said that seeing all of the pink ribbon messages on products was overwhelming and did not feel like messages of concern or compassion for her. They were relentless reminders of her problem and created anxiety and fear. In honor of Jo Spence, the title of this work is “The Seeing Cure.”



Figure 5. The Seeing Cure. In honor of Jo Spence. 48”h x 36”w. Stained wall compound over plywood, embedded natural objects and food packaging.

When artist Jo Spence was diagnosed with breast cancer, she used the British version of phototherapy to record her experiences during this health crisis. She used it as a way to “acknowledge repressed memories and feelings, and allowing them to

resurface” (Pryer 7). “The photographic image can help a viewer tap into her own unconscious, to remember events that have been long forgotten, to feel powerful emotions, to explore the boundaries of her existence, or to bring about self-awareness and personal growth (7). “The seeing cure does not provide a clean bill of health, nor is it literally a life saving practice for those suffering from deadly diseases. Rather, the ‘seeing cure’ creates the conditions for a certain growth and rebalancing to take place” (Pryor 18). Although my imagery is not photographic, my work has helped me in these ways and I hope it can do the same for others.

I am calling painting number five “The ‘L’ Word,” or “Licentious Appetite” as it is on a backwards L-shaped board. Hildegard’s “The Mystical Body Taming the Devil” is plate 20 in Matthew’s Fox’s book. The monster made from parts combined from various species represents “cosmic terror” (Fox 132). Just and good people are overpowering the evil creature. I have remade the monster by using collaged images from a frozen pizza box. Pepperoni creates the oozing sores. Using complementary green as a symbol for melancholy originates with Hildegard, and I concur. “There is an area of human endeavor that Hildegard considers to be particularly susceptible to the fires and poisons and plagues of the demonic one,” says Fox. “That is the marketplace” (134). That demon is the marketplace for me as well. The metaphorical devil is embodied in those who perpetuate obsession with food, weight loss, body image, and who profit from keeping women bound up in these unattainable goals of perfection. The just and good are the people who see through this evil of consumerism and expose it for what it is. I dedicate this painting to Geneen Roth, author of *Women, Food, and God*.



Figure 6. “The L-Word” or Licentious Appetite. Dedicated to Geneen Roth. 38.5”h x 35”w. Stained wall compound over plywood, embedded natural objects and food packaging.

The Drawings

During the first weeks of the spring semester of 2011 I create the second phase of my art work which is a set of three life-size pastel drawings on brown butcher paper. These drawings explore my distorted perception of body image making use of the creative therapy of body-outline drawing (Brooke 83-94). I specifically used Chapter Five of *The Creative Therapies and Eating Disorders* textbook. This chapter, written by Julia Anderson, is entitled, “The Body Outline Drawing Technique: Clinical Considerations for Eating Disordered Trauma Survivors.” The technique is recommended to professional therapists and is not to be used flippantly without consideration of specific client histories of trauma or abuse. Since “art therapy allows access to pre-verbal, non-verbal, and sensory material (Fallon & Wonderlich, 1998) externalizing the client’s internal experience into a concrete form, creating a “window” (from Cohen & Cox) into their world” (Anderson 87). I am ready to open the window.

Following the directions for use by therapists, I roll out a six foot length of brown butcher paper and hang it on the wall. I first draw a life-sized image of my body shape and size as I picture it using the color purple. Then, I ask my husband whom I trust and

with whom I feel secure and loved, to trace my actual body outline to coincide with my perceived outline. “As soon as the tracing is completed, the client is asked to step away from the paper and view the drawings. It is important for the client to express first impressions by either journaling directly on the paper or verbalizing with the therapist” (89). I step back and look. I see that the blue outline tracing my body is smaller than the purple outline I had drawn from my mind’s eye. Yet, it is with disbelief that I react. I saw my husband using the blue pastel at ninety degrees to the paper and I know he moved it accurately along my periphery. But, I cannot at first believe that I am significantly smaller, thinner than I thought. I retrace the blue outlines of my actual self where I am smaller than my perceived self with a neon yellow pastel to reflect the illumination and energy it releases. I write in rapid script, journaling my thoughts and feelings about the experience in concentric circles around my body outline.



Figure 7. I Am NOT A Muse: Sense.
74”h x 52”w. Pastel on brown butcher
paper.

I make a brown paper stencil of my actual body outline to use in future works. I trace it onto a second piece of butcher paper and use yellow, red, and orange pastel to color the negative space. I leave my silhouette a brown paper silhouette. I start writing

significant numbers around the figure. I write my weight and height in red and then I run upstairs to find the print-out of my most recent fasting blood-work numbers and statistics. I start automatic writing in black script the words that describe the numbers. I am starting with images, adding words--art-based research integrating science, sense, and séance of my psyche.

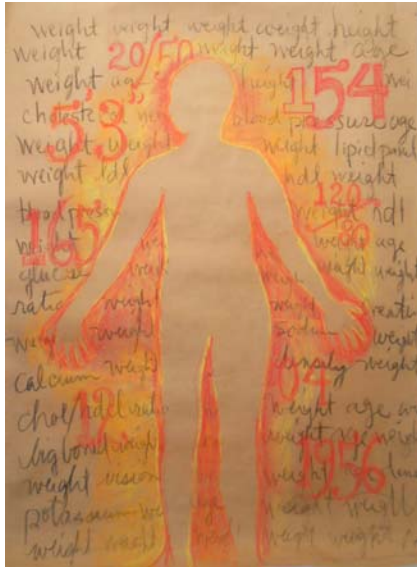


Figure 8. I Am NOT A Muse: Science. 74”h x 52”w. Pastel on brown butcher paper.

The third drawing I do in this series is a drawing of the Venus of Willendorf based on my height of five feet, three inches. I draw realistically using earth-tone pastels, shading with black. When I have drawn her, I turn her upside down and add a branch image, trying to make her appear to be a cocoon. I take pictures of myself trying to look like I would if I were emerging from a cocoon. I start to draw myself emerging, but I grow impatient with trying to draw a realistic likeness of myself. I am in a hurry, so I abandon completing that two-dimensional image. I let it suffice that I am metaphorically shedding my image as a rotund figure. I joke with friends and colleagues that I have discovered myself to be the missing link between Barbie and the Venus of Willendorf. It helps me to associate myself with a pre-patriarchal archetype of the fertile female without

self-loathing and it also helps me to let go of the unrealistic Barbie body image expectation. *I am fecund awesome*. This series is called “Science, Séance, and Sense: I Am NOT A Muse.”



Figure 9. I Am NOT A Muse: Séance. 74”h x 52”w. Pastel on brown butcher paper.

The Collages

“The students were encouraged to accept their own life experience and preoccupations-no matter how ‘trivial’ they had been conditioned to think they were-as worthy subjects for their art” (Harper 765). *Womanhouse*, which made feminist art within a number of modes visible as an entity, proved that women's art could publicly express ideas and feelings special to women's private experience (Harper 772). My private experience, manifested in my compulsive eating and distorted body image, is no longer a trivial and unworthy subject, no longer a distraction from life, but defines my life experience as a woman in a patriarchal society conditioned by the marketplace. Rather than continuing to acquiesce my feminine power by fretting over food and weight, I choose to acknowledge and harness that power and use it to fuel my art making,

teaching, and research. In the third phase of my work, I use more of my growing collection of food packaging. If collecting, sorting, and storing it has been part of my process, I feel compelled to include more of it in the actual art pieces. I decide to remake my body using the food packaging. I again use the stencil of my body outline tracing to create three life-size collages of different analyses of my body systems. I take the old adage “You are what you eat” literally by creating myself out of food package imagery. Color becomes of primary importance, with shape and texture decisions equally secondary.

The process for making these collages is fast and immediate. I make a copy of my body outline stencil that I can cut up. For the collage of my musculature, which I call “Meat Joy” in reference to performance artist Carolee Schneeman again, I sort out of my flattened cardboard containers all of the red packaging. There are more frozen pizza boxes and pancake mix boxes than I realize I had consumed. I considered myself a low-carbohydrate dieter, and this act breaks through that layer of denial. I use the extra stencil as a pattern, lay it over the imagery, and cut pieces that fit together or slightly overlap. I draw a chalk outline of the same self-stencil on cheap white bulletin board paper, and I glue the cut-out sections of red food packaging into place, fitting the pieces like a puzzle with slight overlap in some places. Then, using a printed human anatomical illustration of musculature from the internet as a resource, I paint with white latex paint the ligaments and cartilage and some muscle texture and scrape striations into the white with the opposite end of the paint brush to create the illusion of real flesh. I step back and see that the result is rather shocking-looking, like a body skinned. The raw flesh of the face is particularly disturbing, akin to the reaction elicited by works by Jo Spence.

The red of the food packaging is dominant, but the labels and product names are visible as well. “I am what I eat” is effectively and powerfully communicated. I shade around the edge of the collage with a light blue pastel.

The second collaged body system is my skeletal system. I sort the food packaging to find the white and lighter products. I see that grain product boxes—cereal, crackers, and pasta packaging--are predominantly white. This time I have a print-out of the human skeleton as a guide and I cut each bone and place it within a chalk outline of my body on black bulletin board paper for dramatic contrast.

The third and final collage is of internal organs and is more a mixed media piece. While working on this collage, I am mindful of my own recently diagnosed physical malady, uterine prolapse. After conferring with a gynecologist and urologist, I have just scheduled surgery as a remedy, a hysterectomy, and I am questioning it as the best decision. I have been working on these collages of my own body while they lay on a horizontal surface, the position of a surgeon working on a patient. As I cut images of internal organs from the labels and packages, I learn the positions and relationships of my organs to each other and to significant blood vessels. It feels like I am taking some control over my wellness and envisioning success in the surgery as I work. *Squint tight, more light.*



Figure 10. “You Are What You Eat” Triptych. 74”h x 124”w. Collaged food packaging, latex paint, pastels on paper.

When author Barbara A. Macadam asked feminist Linda Nochlin about women abstract painters in the article “Where the Great Women Artists Are Now,” published in the February 2007 issue of ARTnews magazine, Nochlin said, “These women wondered, ‘How am I going to place myself in relation to the art language of today?’ And this is one way that they thought about it—that the work could be made out of something ephemeral; that it was going to be anti-geometric in a sense, though not always; that it was going to have organic references even though it was abstract; that it might be vulnerable and subject to disappearance—all of which reads as somehow feminine” (116). I am certainly not comparing myself and my work to the great women abstract artists, but I believe I am ready to call myself a feminist artist, especially in light of how Nochlin’s comments encapsulate what I am doing.

I have been reluctant to call myself a feminist in the past. In another article in the February 2007 issue of ARTnews entitled, “Saying the F-Word,” I find a definition of feminism by installation artist Jennifer Dalton that I can whole-heartedly espouse. She says, “My basic definition of a feminist is someone who thinks women are equal to men and should have equal rights.” In the late 1960’s and ‘70’s, sadly I associated the term “feminist” with bra-burning women seeking to prove themselves equal to men by behaving and even dressing like men. As I read more about the evolution and recognition of women’s art, especially about the Feminist Art Program and *Womanhouse*, I realize my perceptions of the Women’s Movement have been radicalized by the mass media. In the mid 1970’s when so much was changing for women artists, I was living the traditional American woman’s life. I graduated from high school thinking that there were three careers available to women--teacher, nurse, or secretary. I chose teacher, not

regrettably. I got married as soon as I got my undergraduate degree, and the following year I gave birth to my son. Meanwhile in the same timeframe, Judy Chicago was creating *The Dinner Party*. I see this work as the pivotal work inspiring the study of women in history. As I embrace my newly realized identification as a feminist, I want to help teach my high school art students about women in history and their precedents. Judy Chicago's seminal work and my own work will be springboards to fulfilling that intention. Gerta Lerner's quote at the beginning of the 2007 book about *The Dinner Party* "makes clear, each generation of women has to rediscover what their foremothers already knew and attempted to transmit---again, and again, and again," says Judy Chicago on page 22 of the introduction. "This is the cycle that *The Dinner Party* is intended to interrupt..." It seems fitting that soon after *The Dinner Party* found its permanent home as the centerpiece in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Gallery of Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, I find my place at the table of feminist artists, and I have learned how to eat a balanced meal and live in an integrated, balanced way.

A VISION

Out of a bright, radiating light, I see myself arm-in-arm escorted by my son and my husband. They release me at the doorway of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Gallery of Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. On either side of the door are guardian sculptures in life-sized feminine forms. On the left side, the statue is a marble carving of The Venus of Willendorf. On the right side, the statue is a marble Barbie. I grin as I walk between the two. Once inside the gallery, I see contemporary women mingling with historical women. Oprah Winfrey greets me and points out and names guests as we walk toward The Dinner Party. There is Geneen Roth talking to Linda Nochlin. Jo Spence, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, and Carolee Schneeman are being ushered to seats together. Frida Kahlo's empty bed rests in a corner. Oprah tells me she has a surprise for me if I hide my eyes, then she guides me to another side of the triangular table. I feel the touch of warm familiar hands and open my eyes to see myself surrounded by my niece, my three sisters, my mother, my grandmother and my great-grandmother. Through a loudspeaker I hear Judy Chicago announce that the gathering is in honor of teachers who have promised to share the accomplishments of women and their wisdom so our history is not lost to each new generation. I am one of the honored guests and I am delighted to be seated at the Hildegard of Bingen place setting! I am introduced as Dora, begat of Dora, eldest daughter of Stella, tenth of thirteen children born to Emma Medora, midwife and community healer in a place called Independence. A dinner bell sounds. The table is graced with relish trays of my Grandmother Stella's

spiced peaches and watermelon rind pickle. Once the throng is seated, a spontaneous silence hushes the crowd. Barely audible is the sound of a whimpering toddler from beneath the table. I raise the tablecloth to find Little Dora, her round face splotched red from her crying. I pick her up and place her in my lap to comfort her. She remembers with her tiny pointer finger, lightly touching our mother's lip and eye where once there had been blood and bruises, and she snubs, as babies do, when the crying is all spent. We are surrounded by our mothers' warmth, love, strength, and we eat without thought of restricting or permitting, just enough to nourish ourselves and feel content.

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APPENDIX: ARTIST'S STATEMENT

PERSONAL ARCHAEOLOGY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ILLUMINATION OF
A LATE-BLOOMING FEMINIST ARTIST

Dora C. May

WCU MAED Thesis Exhibition
March 1-30, 2012Oconaluftee Institute for Cultural Arts
Cherokee, NC

My work started as a way of digging up and dissecting my painful past: the childhood trauma of growing up in domestic violence, believing that I caused it by being a girl, and years of self-loathing as perpetuated by my personal struggle with compulsive eating, weight, and body image.

My work is about remembering, reliving, and re-creating what comforts me: circles of light; sticks, leaves, flowers, rocks, and dirt; Mothers' love. I resonate with a 12th century visionary, Hildegard of Bingen, and study her music and illuminations and text. I come to appreciate the strengths and gifts of feminine precedents from history and my own matrilineal ancestry. How amazing that the reception for this exhibition falls on March 8, International Women's Day, and my maternal grandmother's birthday.

Through my work, I battle the voice of misinformation from the mass media. Through my research I come to understand the voice as the vehicle of repression. I come to realize that food is not my friend, my god, nor is it love. It is not my duty as a woman

to be perfect. “Feminism” is not the “F” word. By rejecting the messages from food packaging and media, I free myself to self-love and creative expression.

By allowing myself to consider a personal cosmology inspired by pre-patriarchal worldviews, I embrace a cyclical notion of time and a more holistic daily existence. I consider the process of household recycling as part of my art work. I consider my roles as teacher, researcher, and artist as integrated, not separate and fragmented. I achieve a sense of balance and empowerment and hope to share this illumination through the exhibition of my art and through my writing and teaching.