

Decorating Dissidence 2017: Feminism, Modernism and the Arts

Friday November 3rd 2017

Craft, Absorption and Maternal Loss

My research integrates creative practice working with fibre based materials with the scholarly and cultural exploration of the literatures and theories of maternal loss. Using paper as a means of connoting affect and grief in the practice, paper becomes the metaphor to discuss research questions that connects the maternal with affect in maternal grief.

The process is auto-ethnography, using subjective experience as a medium through which to reflect on the relationship between materiality and affect. The substrate using play; judgment is suspended, is hand made to create individual materiality. The hand is essential in making and learning tacit knowledge of paper. The paper is a metaphor for absorption, we absorb the stresses of life in our work and mop up the daily spills. The theory of culture and society, which enabled the methods of auto-ethnography and creative practice research to emerge, is the paradigm of post modern and post positivist accounts of new relations between 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity'.

Moving forward from Glaser and Strauss's ideas on Grounded Theory, using contemporary mixed methods of display together with reflective practice are compatible with the emergence of feminist thinking on the significance of subjectivity and affect.

There are many losses mothers have to bear, including losing our own mothers and in the process becoming unmothered. Making new sense of the conventional silence surrounding complex mourning, the practice itself connoting affect through the materialities of paper. Creative practice is connected to subjective processes of grief, mourning and reparation. The second, more enigmatic, is that all losses evoke, in some complex, enfolded way, the first ontological loss of the subject's first object of attachment.

Jules Findley

Bio:

Jules Findley works as Principal Lecturer at University of Brighton within the programme of Fashion and Textiles. Previously as academic programme leader, she has led a department of over 400 students, and has many years experience as Course Leader in Fashion Promotion courses. Jules Findley teaches extensively in Fashion Communication, whilst being a PhD candidate in Textiles at Royal College of Art.

Jules Findley's practice emerges from researching into emotions in bereavement using affect and display in these life changing events, as means of conveying sensitivity through the material of hand made paper. Examining the raw emotions of grief through the wider context of domesticity questions awareness of bereavement issues from the public and practices of mourning.

<http://julesfindley.com>

@julesfindley

Instagram jules.findley

414words

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Craft, Absorption and Maternal Loss

Contemporary craft is being formed using traditional techniques in new ways of making. Through making hand made paper my research investigates the emotional aspects of bereavement from affect, attachment using the methodology of play. Examining the external torn edge as a means of articulating the internal intense raw feelings we feel in the early stages of bereavement. The raw, frayed edge when paper is torn and we hear its tears. We weep tears for the loss of our loved ones. The tearing of fabric in ritual is present or the urge to tear in anger. As we feel torn and frayed around the edge in mourning our loss, we ask questions such as how much can our grief absorb?

Making material from scratch is a fundamental part of generating a product that can be memorialised or used in burial. Making hand made paper from recycled items is a humbling, sustainable process filled with compassion, and within death, love and memory are ever present.

Motherhood naturally involves attachment that is severed after a death of someone dear, the hardest love to detach from someone you love and let them go, as they let life go. Love, separation and detachment form the key components of loss, bereavement and burial. How can memory be obtained without losing the emotional connection to the objects that connect the bereaved with that living person? This forms part of my research questions in my practice.

Things that are associated with that love become instantly precious items that are connected to the life of the dead. In processing these emotions, the rites the bereaved practice, help them accept their loss.

Fragmentation, absorption and the human condition

Paper and cloth absorb the smells and stains of our lives. In mopping up our daily spillages, we use a dry paper towel or a thin cloth to absorb them. If it's cloth it is squeezed out, reused and placed in a way to absorb more, if it's paper there is a point where no more water can be absorbed, and it is saturated, it disperses or it disintegrates into soggy fragments. In daily life as humans are we like that piece of dry paper? Do we absorb daily spillages and have to mop up after people until we are saturated and slowly as saturation becomes more invisible with age, then we are dispersed, is that the human condition? It's how we cope with saturation and are resilient to these daily occurrences, make us who we are as individuals. Our spillages are different quantities to each others; how we dry out in between mop-ups perhaps allows some to absorb more than others, not that it's competition, more to do with the quality of paper and the type of spillage.

A great deal of water is needed in making the consistency of hand made paper. Too little water and the paper comes out thick and crumbly, too much water and the paper becomes too thin and fragile. Once the shredded paper is absorbed by the water and is well mixed with more water, it becomes a lighter, much thinner version of 'papier maché'. The mushy mix is not paper at this stage. At the papier maché stage it can be shaped and compressed into moulds like sculpture, the water can be squeezed out, sculptural possibilities exist. In making flat sheets of paper, more water is needed the mixture is collected on a flat mesh, which is then taken off the mesh or deckle and put out to dry. To absorb the large amount of water, I use cloth laid over a pile of stacked newspapers. The weight of hand made paper with cloths in between, lie on top of the newspapers. The layers of paper and wetness are heavy with water. At this point it is useful to have a cloth to absorb the excess water that the process makes. This is my personal method, but it is not the only method – some practitioners leave their newly formed damp paper sheets to dry on windows, traditional Washi paper is laid out on large pieces of wood in the sun.

The methodology of play comes into papermaking early on in the practice process, part of composite integrated methods the paradigm shift is a misfit, started by practitioners such as Rachel Philpott (2010), 'The Fold' Leonard Strauss differentiates between science practice and handmade. Jung (1986) describes creativity as *'the creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from the inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the object it loves'*

Scientists learn from the methods of play, although they practice the methods of the laboratory. Perhaps scientists are skeptical of failure, are artists in the same way? Failure surely leads the outcomes into another area. . Jung (1957) says *'Mistakes are, after all the foundations of truth and if a man does not know what a thing is, it is at least an increase in knowledge if he knows what it is not'*

Sustainability is a consideration in papermaking but it is not the reason for my research. If papermaking is not going well and it dries to the wrong consistency it can be re-shredded, re-torn and remade into a new paper. The hand making part of paper making is part of the process of my research as it is the hand that controls much of the process, consistency and addition of bits of memoria, shredding of textiles into fabric bits, cutting hair, all of these personal additions can be added by hand to the making. In describing practice from the context of making, *'praxic movement...'* described by Wilson as the intent of the hand, *'perforce a sign for the act which it accomplishes, irrespective of the communicative intent of the doer'* (Wilson, 1998 p 204). The same hand also wipes away the tears, and copes with grief by mopping up the spillages. This maternal hand also loves a child and cares for the elderly. It is a compassionate hand, and it is this hand that makes paper, even metaphorically.

Caillous (date), examines play in terms of six characteristics (*ref), play is not prescribed, it is an activity made through free choice. It is a separate activity from daily routine aspects of life. In terms of papermaking it is the outcome that is uncertain, is it different from an iterative method where you are aware of what an outcome is going to be. Play is closer to the sublime, although the sublime is closer to death, as it is uncertain. **The research I am**

investigating is a combination of the sublime and play, through the poesis of paper. (*back this up)

The analogy for paper and absorption can be compared to looking at handmade paper as skin being permeable yet dripping with water. Dipping skin in water comes to mind, the drips from the water run everywhere, concave, without a towel to mop up, and dry our skin. Skin is a fragile organ, subject to being torn, ripped, with raw edges in a similar way to the newly formed raw edges of paper. During the process of getting the paper mush on to a mesh gird (or anything that will let the water through), and transferring this on to the area selected for drying, sometimes bubbles can form under the wet leaves of potentially new hand made paper. These bubbles are akin to blisters under the skin, convex, protruding and need to be smoothed out at this stage of making, in order for the bubbles or blisters to be dispersed. Paper wrinkles and creases like older skin does when it is crumpled and squashed up. In frustration and anger hasn't everyone screwed up a bit of paper into a tiny ball? In unwrapping the ball and smoothing out the paper, the paper retains the memory like skin, and in some types of paper the texture changes when smoothed out.

Our daily work absorbs the stresses and pain of what is happening in our lives. We absorb all the care in our children, our relatives, our families and then we, like paper need to dry out so we can reabsorb. There is a large range of saturation points for humans, which makes us individual. Hand made paper can be fragmented possible akin to our lives. Paper is also similar to textiles as it can act like a fabric, by having properties that wick moisture like skin can repel water or absorbs moisture; there are many similarities with hand made paper, cloth and human skin.

Hand made paper and emotions

Examining tearing paper and tears, tears are not necessarily filled with just sadness they can be bitter tears in grief, of fear, anger, shame, and guilt. Morgan (2008 p37), discusses Freud making guilt the dominant emotion, however after many decades he argues that shame has replaced guilt especially in Western societies due to the way that guilt and shame are mentioned. '*Guilt is thought to be focused on a specific behavior or action, while shame is thought to be aimed globally at the whole self*' Morgan (ibid).

Morgan (ibid) maintains that shame is a more pervasive emotion than guilt, '*as an expression of one's sense of having failed to be the person one wants to be*' when it comes to development and identity. In bereavement these unwanted emotions have a habit of rising to the surface, as families unresolved grief from the past surface to wreck the lives of the recently bereaved and the loss becomes tied in with other family emotions and memories.

In grief, there is water and mopping up involved, as well as invariably anger, anger at self as well as anger at the recently deceased as an emotion. Anger is now recognised as an emotion that is part of the grief process (Bowlby, 2005 p65) of the bereaved, rather than anger by those in mourning being perceived as being on a pathological path as Freud (1984) suggests in '*Mourning and Melancholia*'. According to Bowlby (1979, 2005), the anger generated is an attempt to recover the lost person, it manifests itself in one of the first stages of mourning in an effort to bring that person back, and the yearning for that lost

person. The emotion of anger in bereavement was thought of as pathological by Freud as logically it is futile to feel anger at death. However since then, it is now thought that the human condition explores all aspects of how to bring that lost person back, and for mourning to be healthy, anger manifests itself as a normal part of the process. Once acceptance of the person not returning then acceptance can be made by the bereaved that the person is not going to return and admit defeat, an re-emergence in to the world can be made, like a cloud lifting the heart and mind eventually (Lewis 1961). The adult's initial response to loss, with the emotions of anger and protest is in a similar response to a child's loss of an object. This loss of relationship to the attached object, to a child is a tragedy. The loss of love, abandonment, the lost person, but what is painful to the adult is the loss of relationship. The natural maternal attachment has been broken and this is why a loss of a child, baby or lover to the maternal cannot be healed, it becomes an emotional wound. This makes a living loss harder to bear, without the finding of the person, or remains then no closure can be made. It is a seeping, dripping wound, which has spillage around it, and it leaks.

In the process of making hand made paper, paper can be made from reusing recycled torn bits of discarded papers, this is a sustainable element in papermaking, currently under appreciated. Ancient and traditional papermaking often involves reeds such as papyrus and it's the breaking down of Kozo reeds that make the famous Japanese Washi paper. In sustainable hand made paper the idea of reusing and remaking of something old into something new, is similar to the emergence of the photograph from the chemical bath, all done by hand. The repetitive process is comforting in its reassurance of the same, but unique. In the beginning of experimentation into hand made paper for no special reason, only white paper was made using different types of paper such as cotton, Khadi, then venturing into different types of papers for different reasons.

Brown paper made from packaging materials, brown paper from bread packaging, and egg cartons. This had a domestic approach to paper making and using day-to-day products, which were brown found at home.

Black paper made successfully from avocado packaging and tissue paper again lying around the house, which was remade into paper.

Pink paper was tested from the idea from a student who was making backgrounds for animations, by adding paint with glue.

This experiment was tested to see if paint would sink into the paper as the paint did when the portrait in 'Hanging By a Thread' was exhibited in the RCA work in progress in January 2016, the first of a series of fragmentation using paint on paper. Watercolour paint absorbed quickly into the unsized paper, and I found I had to use many layers of paint to get the desired effect. Once dried, the portrait of the fragmented paper appeared to have potential to fade and the results of the fading seems like an identity gradually fading away. We are in a world where our identity is being narrowed through data collection, as our choices are narrowed it increases chances of conflict. If identity acknowledged as broad we have more opportunities of making friendships and perhaps our losses can be shared, the burden of grief does not have to be so great.

In families, identity and grief for the loss of that person and their identity can make us feel guilty for abjection. (Kristeva, 1982:13) Kristeva writes about the abject, and breaking away from the 'maternal entity'. The child must make the mother abject so that a separation is initiated from mother and child. Kristeva argues that the child's identity cannot form properly without this separation. Abjection is necessary before narcissism and this is part of development. Freud was of a mind that in death the self splits, and this splitting is also described by Kristeva (1989) in relation to the depressed as separating 'the signifier from the referent'. In narcissism it is the splitting that maintains the omnipotence as well as the destructiveness and the anguish of annihilation. Kristeva, who with Abraham, Freud and Klein agree that *'depression like mourning conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object' revealing the ambivalence of the depressed person in context to mourning, 'I love that object, but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbed it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am non-existent'*. (Kristeva 1989:1 pp11) Self loathing and wanting to swap places with the person that is dying is part of letting that person go and accepting the person will die. Kristeva sees the abject as unidentifiable unlike the object, however the abject she finds attractive and at the same time, repulsive.

Conclusions

Craft demonstrates a process of making, using materials to mould into an artefact. Where there is craft, there is also art. Art reveals or frames the emotions or relationships with materials or human thoughts and materials, memories of material experience with other human beings including the maternal.

The art work is action, it is the untold, the invisible, unseen and ignored the shadow of art but no less important – the art explores the raw dissolution of relations, of relationships formed and dissolved, fading but near the surface, not forgotten. Repetition of process stills the mind, creating a process, which is a material matter happening internally and then externally. The emotions can be explored by tangibly walking through the emotions with the paper-making and the outcomes.

Language can act as a lever in abstraction, internally direct mapping and cognitively into making. In this way language and grief can be like skin, skin is double sided, the internal side and the external, in a similar way paper can have an external side, and an internal side and one or both of these can be absorbent. Re making paper is shredding already-made paper and the existing materials may retain the history, stains and traditions. Paper made from fibre is different, when paper is remade the use of that paper has changed. Kristeva, uses language to convey the meaning of affect as the symbolic and whatever is contained such as a vessel is symbolic and the rest is semiotic. Kristeva sees the 'loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity' (Kristeva 1989). Kristeva is concerned about the ratio about the symbolic to the semiotic.

The art in paper-making is also like a language, and it is unique, like a mute body that cannot speak, but absorbs the experiences of life like skin, and portrays the affect of

mourning. Paper is a substrate and an ethnographical metaphor for what is buried and the strata of emotional knowledge, consciousness and materiality. The paper-making is an iterative process, which produces a tangible but new outcome. Material has an etymological matter; a mother can understand in every material, which is inherent to a mother in loss the relationship with the material matter which has emotional memory and meaning. Working with used material or added material through paper-making becomes changed, a process of transformation. Immersing fabric in water and emerging has a process of rebirth, re-emergence, re-generating. The re-emergence into the world after a period and the 'work' of mourning.

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