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Left to My Own Devices

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

By
Charisse Celino
B.A., Loyola University, 2002
B.F.A, Loyola University, 2008
December 2010

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Thank you to Scotty, Vickie, Tracie, Francis and Lana for your support, cheerleading and general kick in the pants and to Ian for giving me a hard time, as only a son can do.

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Abstract

I compose work from what may be considered debris. There is a history contained within these items that I want to redefine. Materials dictate and inform the direction of my work. The search and discovery of these objects is intuitive. Acquiring the piece(s) ties into my inspiration of its' possible new function. My objective is to encourage others to notice the everyday and see the aesthetic value of these objects. Often they are organized into a grid. Whether taking an individual object or making multiples into a single image, I am altering the function of these items, reordering them and declaring them as artwork. My transformation of objects is intended to give them a new history.

Introduction

Writing and materials dictate my particular kind of art making. Text recurs throughout my work. Many of my writings are connected to memory or loss of it. The initial beauty in the found object and its' subsequent transformation fascinate me. My response to these materials is usually immediate. Process is an integral part in my handling of the objects. The repetition of the act of making is an essential part of my understanding of my materials its' limits and possibilities.

“Charisse Celino’s mixed media sculptures exchange found objects for the material and symbols of our daily lives. Her work deals with themes of repression, loss of memory, and obsolete media. The restrained minimalism exhibited in pieces like *Engaged* reveal Celino to be a thoughtful and sincere artist who is able to commit herself to dealing with issues that can be haunting and revelatory of the ubiquitous elements of human experience.” Press Release, LSU Union Gallery, 20x20x20

The history of the object is not as important as what it becomes now, as art. The expression is a direct response to the object and/or a word or phrase. Much of my work is done in multiples and creates symbols instead of direct text. I am drawn to artists such as Joseph Havel who uses multiples. When his work is initially seen as a whole it immediately draws me into it, curious about the parts that make up that whole.

I often work in a series, a collection of work under one title, not necessarily shown or made at the same time. Often these series overlap, can continue for years, and can be completely different from each other. “Identity Crisis” and “Preserved Memories” are two such series and I intend to talk about some of the pieces in the body of my thesis. The common thread in these is the uses of text and vellum. “Transparent Hangings”, one of my most recent courses, I have used carbon paper instead of vellum and Chap Stick as a mark-making implement.

Most of these pieces are personal narratives. Although, rarely, I also deal with political issues, making commentaries on such things as the Iraq/Afghanistan war and the governmental bailout in 2008.

The “life” of my pieces tends to not be permanent. Many times I will disassemble and reuse materials. Some works change according to space, as I feel strongly connected to installation art. The “grid” recurs throughout my work, despite my efforts to discard it. I initially tried to rid myself of the grid because I felt it limiting, but instead I find it gives me a ground and sense of order from which to work.

“...creativity was the important thing and I would see things that I could use, everywhere. I always wanted to show the world that art is everywhere, except it has to pass through a creative mind...I began to see things, almost anything along the street, as art. I don’t think you can touch a thing that cannot be rehabilitated into another life. And once I gave a whole world life in that sense, I could use anything.” Louise Nevelson

“Meaningless work is obviously the most important and significant art form today. It is honest. The aesthetic feeling given by meaningless work cannot be described exactly because it varies with each individual doing the work. By meaningless work I simply mean work which does not make you money or accomplish a conventional purpose.” Walter De Maria

“In the creative act the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious. The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world.” Marcel Duchamp

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In my “Identity Crisis” series, I was undergoing changes in my life and really lost as to what defined me. The first piece in this series consists of voided checks from my now defunct Whitney Bank checking account. On each check I wrote the year and “VOID”, I blackened the checking account numbers and put “21 years” as the

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amount. The words “FUCK YOU” were printed on each check. I then carefully made columns taping one check below the other to form a five-foot piece. Each of these columns overlapped the next from left to right until an entire wall was covered. The columns were attached to the wall at the top only, so the piece would move ever so slightly when someone walked by it.

These checks spoke of a long time relationship that ended in a matter of seconds. In New Orleans Whitney Bank is an institution and one of the things that can define you is where you bank. I had been a loyal customer for 21 years and when I decided to withdraw my funds and close my account, I didn't get so much as a “Why?” This angered and hurt me, besides leaving me with boxes of unused checks. The end result of the piece is cold and organized, but emotionally raw. As I wrote on each check I was filled with negative emotions. The organization and creation of the actual object calmed those emotions. The result is a grid of looming large, moving and rustling of papers that once held the potential for monetary value reduced to mere sheets of paper.

Sol LeWitt says of his multiples: “When an artist uses multiples, he usually chooses a simple and readily available form. The form itself is of very limited importance. It is best that the basic unit be deliberately uninteresting so that it may more easily become an intrinsic part of the entire work. Using complex basic forms only disrupts the unity of the whole. Using a simple form repeatedly narrows the field of the work and concentrates the intensity to the arrangement of the form. This arrangement becomes the end while the form becomes the means.”



Plate 1. Untitled (Void)

The second installation in this series is *Skewed Rorschach/ Satsumas*. I constructed twenty, eight-by-ten inch frames from left over construction supplies. The backing of each frame was painted white and textured to look like the wall on which it would be hung. The frame itself was painted flat black. I saved Satsuma peels that were methodically peeled from their fruit, dried them out (which made them texturally interesting) and painted them flat black. I then affixed the peels to the frames. There are twenty frames situated five across and four down. In each are the peels appearing active but contained with anthropomorphic qualities. They emulate, to me, skewed inkblots, Rorschach tests gone awry, which are used in psychology and psychiatry. They do not mirror each other as an inkblot would do, but I recognize them as a sort of test for ones psyche. Instead of a professional asking me what I see, I self-evaluate. I consider this piece more successful than the “VOID” checks as the stark black and white grid organization have interesting negative and positive space and light and shadow. In it is a more thoughtful presentation and lends more interest to the audience. Many could not differentiate whether the satsumas were attached to the wall or not and certainly did not read the black pieces as fruit rind.



Plate 2. Skewed Rorschach

Of all of the “Identity Crisis” series pieces I consider *Defining Myself* to be the most successful. This work is composed of a black floor grate in which each space is a word typed on vellum describing myself. The vellum and type are recurring elements in my work. Some of the words are brutal or self-effacing. The grate is hung slightly off of the wall so that light can come through the vellum, as it is a border between the artist and the viewer but slightly backlit to illuminate to the viewer who the artist is. Many can relate to the words as they may be used to describe others as well. Again there is a nice stark contrast of the black and white, no room for shades of gray here.



Plate 3. Defining Myself

“Preserved Memories” is another series which is ongoing and started in 2007. Almost all of the pieces include text on vellum, glass containers and stainless steel. These materials were used to convey an outward clinical atmosphere to house personal narrative. I wanted a barrier between the subject matter and the viewer. Many of these pieces are delicate and not meant to be handled again distancing the viewer from the inner workings. The glass is used as a permanent but fragile containment and its’ reflective qualities allow the viewer to see themselves in the work.

“Glass alienates subject from object. From behind glass, the spectator’s view is objective.”-The Glass Divider- Dan Graham

One work in this series *Positive Memories* encouraged the viewer to touch and read the phrases on the vellum. The piece consisted of a small stainless steel table on which a test tube holder filled with glass droppers was placed. Each dropper then contained a positive memory from my past. The other pieces in the series dealt with the not so pleasant or issues with anger or hurt. I wanted to have something without negative connotations attached to it. *Positive Memories* is still contained but engaging.

“I want to produce images that startle into recollection. I want to think of history so that it is not a record of events but a method of release.”- John Baldessari



Plate 4. Positive Memories

The most recent work in “Preserved Memories” is *I am...* This piece comprises four round-bottomed glass beakers, precariously placed in a chrome condiment holder and placed on a stainless steel table. In each beaker are self-descriptions, four subjects in all.

The subjects are I am..., I am not..., I am about to go off on a tangent..., and I do not like... I made a list of words or phrases to correspond with each subject matter, printed them on vellum and then cut each word or phrase into strips, which I then inserted into the beakers. This was not only an exercise in self-study and awareness, but also an emptying of the brain of things that rang true. Again, it is a personal narrative, placed in a precarious clinical setting, obstructing the viewer to the revelatory contents. Other pieces in this series have been sealed in wax or preserved in Enviro-tex. These are meant to be permanent unless dropped.

Art Speak says of narrative art: “The idea of narrative art can be art that represents events taking place over time or imply something that has already happened. Words are a frequent element in narrative art especially suited to a psychological self-examination.”



Plate 5. I am...



Plate 6. I am...

In *Defining Myself, Positive Memories and I am...* I used my own words. In the works *Vickie Says, Re: Bo* and the *Postcard Project* I used others words. The *Postcard Project* began several years ago, initially I asked people to send me postcards by either writing to them or verbally inviting them. Being in an environment where my main form of communication was email, I wanted to revive the lost art of letter writing. I chose postcards because they are public and I felt I could then utilize them in anyway I saw fit for the final piece. I received postcards from friends, family and strangers, some with generic images others homemade. I must admit getting something in the mail besides bills was quite refreshing. I began asking for more postcards via email and realized I was contradicting myself in the basis of the project. Another issue was that of no return address, as I could not reciprocate. This made me want to make sure I paid homage to all that had worked in helping me by sending cards. I documented the front of each card with photographs and wrote, verbatim, what others had written to me in one long document. I still was left with the dilemma of the final piece. Finally, I committed to having the words in their entirety put on a four by four-foot piece of Plexiglas. I then suspended the Plexiglas about a foot from the wall so the black letters would lend to shadow on the wall, a projection of sorts. What had started on a commentary on the lost art of letter writing and obsolete media became a positive, strange and interesting project. The end result of the non-sensical text suspended in mid air pays homage to the thought and time people gave to me.

On Kawara utilized the mail as a form of artwork.

“I search consciously for a form of art which is not tied by tradition, in which the research is important.” Jan Dibbets

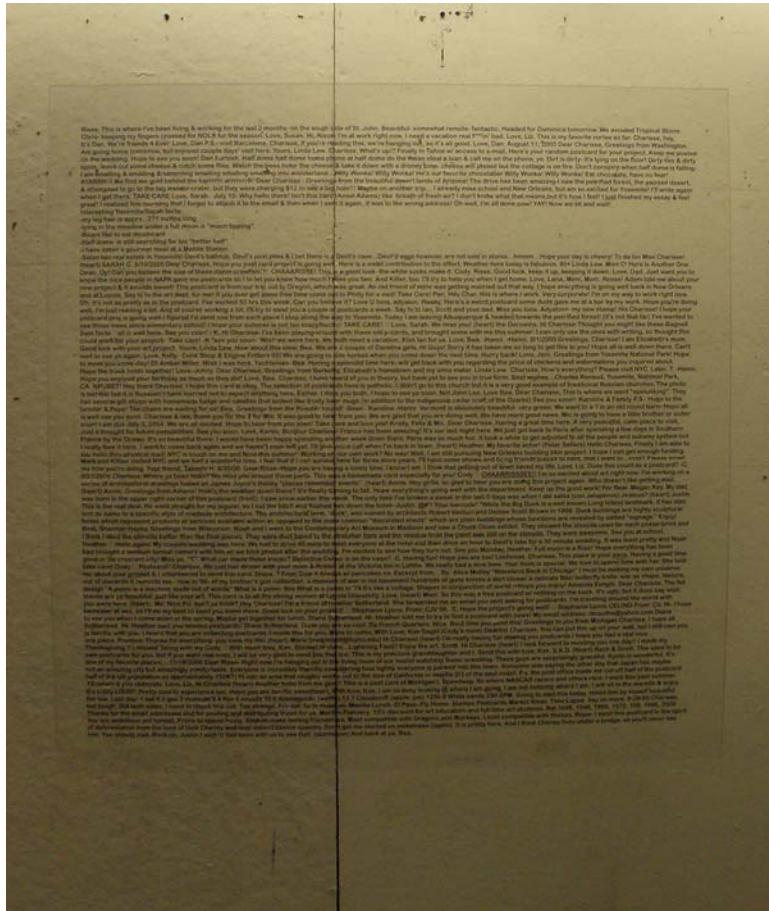


Plate 7. Postcard Project

Although the basis of the postcard project was how quickly technology evolves, I rarely make work about political or news related events. *Bailout* and *Hardwar* are two of the few pieces I have made with political commentary as their subject. In *Bailout* the materials came to me first. A friend gave me some American flag fabric and I spotted the life vest on the side of the road. Intuition caused me to do a drive by collection of the personal floatation device (Mae West). In September/October 2008, the governmental bailout began. I married these two found objects immediately. This is a sewn piece and several of my pieces after this one have stitching as an important part of the whole. What many considered as a safety net for the country, I saw as a risk. The life vest symbolizes something just being tossed casually to those that are drowning with no guarantee of survival.

The process in which I made *Bailout* can be summed up by Sol LeWitt's description of conceptual art: "Conceptual art, the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical, it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is free from the artist as craftsman. He makes the work mentally interesting to the spectator and it is emotionally dry. Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. The ideas need not be complex....Ideas are discovered by intuition."



Plate 8. Bailout

Abandoned is another example of me choosing something intuitively and immediately knowing what to do with it. I was drawn to a rusted plaster trowel with a wooden handle. I picked some old plaster from a used goods store and applied it to the wall. I then made marks with the trowel and left it there in the wall as if it were abandoned mid-stroke. The plaster was yellowed from age, as this was important because I wanted it to coincide with the age of the trowel. The art of plaster has basically disappeared from New Orleans since 2005, having been replaced with Sheetrock. There was much appeal in the strength of the old plaster trowel, in the materials it was comprised of and the labor it must have seen. My intention was to change its' history. This work was poignant, as it seemed at once natural and unnatural. The viewer should be encouraged to ask the question of why was this forgotten, walked away from? This is also an example of nonpermanent art where only the documentation exists. In the end it is about my intuitive response to materials, my natural curiosity of installation art and my appreciation for the strength in an object where an artist can act simply and change the objects' meaning.

On Duchamp: “ He chose it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that it's useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view- created a new thought for that object. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self- analysis, spoken or written, or even thought out.” Kristine Stiles



Plate 9. Abandoned

In collecting objects I put some aside that do not announce their purpose to me as immediately as *Abandoned* or *Bailout*. Several film reels, an Army medical trunk full of gauze bandages and industrial sized spools of red thread finally came together as *Edit*. I am, by nature tactile I must touch and feel things. *Edit* allows me to do this in my making.

“It is very important to me to have first order experiences- seeing, touching, smelling, hearing- with objects/images and to let that experience register.”

-Tony Cragg

The catalyst for this piece was advice I received in my second semester of graduate school. I was told to edit, to not make so much, but to concentrate more on less work. I took that advice to heart in the preparation of this piece. In November 2009 I began cutting individual frames from a reel of film. Each cut piece has two frames of film and forms a square. I then cut two by two inch pieces of gauze to correspond with each film piece. Currently I am using red thread to form an “x” and attach the film to the gauze by sewing. I have made this piece “portable” so I can work on it anywhere. It is extremely time consuming and labor intensive. The making can also be meditative as I repeat the same motions over and over. This piece is unfinished though there is a means to an end. I first formed the pieces into a grid but I have other plans for the finished product. The transparent nature of the film emulates my past use of vellum and text. The red color of the thread represents pain, agony and blood. The “x” is there as a mark of self-editing and the stitching is to represent my mending of my old ways and repairing the verbal cuts that hurt me in the past.



Plate 10. Edit

Although *Edit* is as yet incomplete I wish the end results to have the movement and presence of *Dirty Laundry*, an installation. Art Speak defines installation art as I see it.

“Installation can be site specific, providing viewers with the experience of being surrounded by art. Most are unsalable; being exhibited then dismantled leaving only documentation. Installation art is usually labor intensive.”

The first piece in the transparent hanging series was *Dirty Laundry*. I wrote an entire journal on dot matrix paper that had carbon paper between each sheet. I then constructed clotheslines and used clothespins to hang the carbon like you would your laundry to dry. Instead of type this piece had my hand writing to evoke emotion in the personal nature and honesty in the work. The carbon is the in between, usually discarded and practically obsolete.

I hung these where they would move and rustle. The viewers were invited into the work as the real interest lay in the back of the carbon. This is where the light would go through the text and allow the viewer to read my very personal observations.

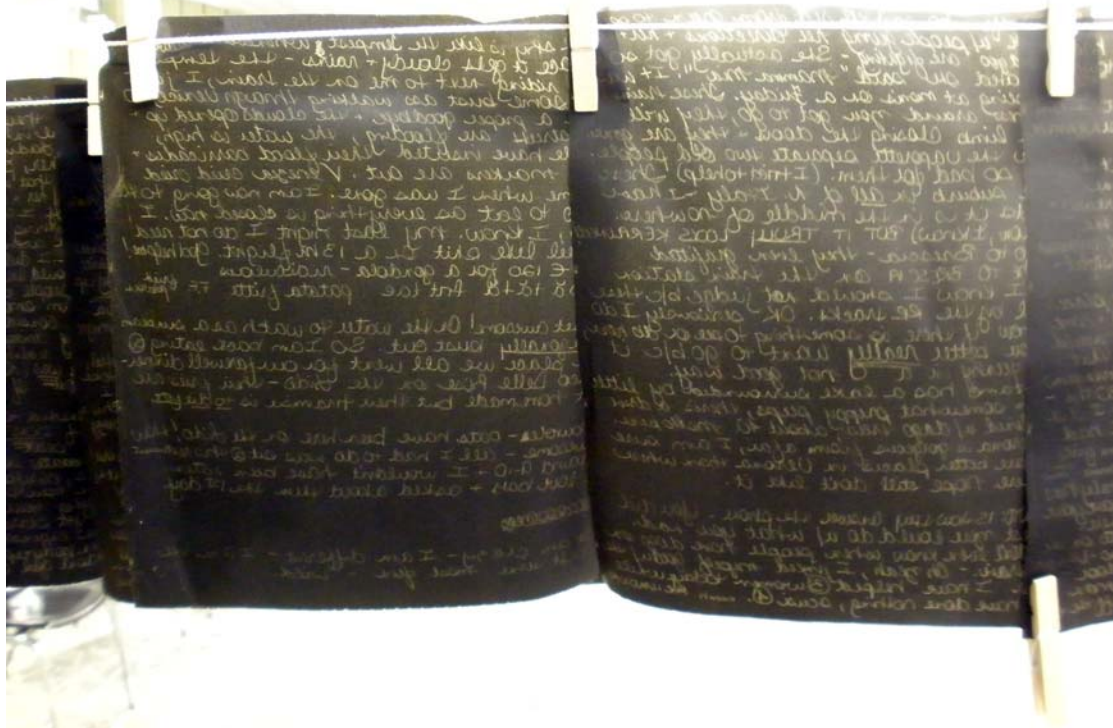


Plate 11. Dirty Laundry

The second in this series consisted of worn olive drab paper and mark making with Chap Stick. I used “Gregg’s Shorthand” and began the exercises in the book. Writing in shorthand was connected to a childhood memory and again touched on something almost obsolete. This was not the first time I used shorthand in my work but the way I presented this was much more effective. I purposely heated the paper to encourage the Chap Stick to permeate the paper. This allowed the light to come through the text. I hung the paper in strips from the ceiling to the floor allowing the viewer to experience it in the round and for the paper to sway and rustle as the viewer passed it. The idea of movement of and interaction with the work is important in both of the cases. I want the viewer to have an inclusive experience where more than one of the senses is affected.



Plate 12. Shorthand

My most current work is comprised of multimedia paintings in which a word or phrase is the catalyst for all of the elements that make up the piece. Going back to “painting” after several years of creating sculpture and focusing on photography has proved a successful process.

“For example, conceptual art, is a sounding instrument between printed words, luminous writings and letters scrawled in hasty nervous instinctive calligraphy.”
-Mario Merz

DONT BOTHER is one of three paintings I completed over the summer of 2010. The canvas is four by four feet; the background is painted pewter with black strokes. This color choice comes from past work. This painting began in January as an experimentation with silver leaf and correction fluid. The silver leaf was squares upon a square and the grid pattern emerged subconsciously. I set the painting aside, knowing I was not finished and continued my other work.

An event happened that was the catalyst for what the painting was to become. I made slits in the canvas and sewed them back together with red thread in an “x” pattern. This emulated stitches and the healing process from deep wounds. As in the past I used wax to seal these stitches and ensure they would remain emotionally intact and closed. The final act for this painting was the text. DONT BOTHER was painted across the canvas with dark red iridescent paint. This statement was from an emotionally raw place and the formalizing of it in a painting was insurance from feeling hurt again. The subsequent paintings repeat the grid, experimentation with materials and are titled *HOW DARE YOU*, *LET IT GO* and *LEAVE ME ALONE*.



Plate 12. DONT BOTHER

Conclusion

I am currently exploring more mixed media paintings in which the text becomes the catalyst and culmination of the piece. I will continue to experiment with materials bought and found. Delving into the importance of text and its use in my work is ongoing. I need to decide whether to make more permanent pieces or concentrate more on installation and the reuse of objects. This is another crossroad I have come to in the midst of my thesis. I will also continue my abstract photography and may apply these images to my two-dimensional mixed media works. The “paintings” have more weight in their permanence compared to my sculpture regardless of the materials.

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Vita

Charisse Celino was born and raised in New Orleans, LA. She received her Bachelor of Arts in sculpture from Loyola University, New Orleans in 2002, her Bachelor of Fine Arts in new genres in 2008 and is currently pursuing her graduate degree at the University of New Orleans. She is majoring in sculpture and photography is her minor. Her graduation date is scheduled December 2010.