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In Context

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IN CONTEXT

by

KATE FELZIEN

(Under the Direction of Patricia J. Walker)

ABSTRACT

The present thesis seeks to show the influences to my artwork and describe the body of work found in my thesis exhibition, *In Context*. The role of family and childhood are discussed and related to the work. The feminist writers bell hooks, Jane Tompkins, and Hélène Cixous are cited as influential to the initial exploration of my content. Artists discussed include Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, Annette Messager, and Robert Rauschenberg. It is further shown how poetry and prose evolve as the catalyst for content for my work and how this enforces my belief that only through examining the personal can we reveal the universal human condition.

INDEX WORDS: Art, MFA Thesis, Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art, Painting, Sculpture, Watercolor, Encaustic, Acrylic, Paper, Cloth, Bronze, Canvas, Found Objects, Childhood, Biography, Feminism, Poetry, Prose, Catalyst, Universal, Human Condition, bell hooks, Jane Tompkins, Helene Cixous, Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, Annette Messager, Robert Rauschenberg, Gertrude Stein, Tolstoy

IN CONTEXT

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

2011

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IN CONTEXT

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION OF WORK

In my work, I use personal memories and relationships as the starting point to address the larger human condition. My past professional jobs also have a strong influence on my approach to art making. While at Georgia Southern University (GSU), I have explored this influence through women and gender studies readings and research. While I do not attempt to make feminist art, my experiences as a woman in the fields of computer science and business as well as my experiences as a daughter and wife can be seen in my work. In addition, I have also explored poetry and prose as a principle generator for ideas as well as a way to conceptualize subject matter. These explorations have coalesced into the body of work for my thesis show, *In Context*.

My identity began in the voice of my family. On August 3, 1971 in Jackson, Tennessee, I was born with a birth defect which caused my large intestines to develop outside my body. As a child, I was repeatedly told about the commotion this caused in the small hospital where I was born. The condition required that a specialist be flown in from Memphis to treat the rare defect. This piece of biographical information, passed down to me as early as I can remember, created a sense of wonder as well as fear. I was mystified that something that I couldn't even remember would influence my sense of body and health. It wasn't until I was an adult and having surgery for another medical issue that I fully understood the defect and how it affected my body. When I began making art, this story was one of the first that I chose to address. By doing so, I was able to finally grasp the influence of the biographical stories that are passed from generation to generation. It

is not really surprising, then, that biography and childhood came to play such a pivotal role in the artwork included in my MFA thesis exhibition.

Childhood stories and more directly, relationships within my family, are the starting point for my art. My earliest influence is undoubtedly my mother. As a child, she taught me needlework, quilting, crochet, tatting, and more recently, knitting. When I am feeling stuck on a piece, I almost always return to this familiar activity—using thread or sewing as a catalyst for ideas. The ribbons and cloth often found in my artwork are due to her influence. My relationship with my father also is a recurring theme in my work. As with many women, the relationship between father and daughter has been a defining influence in my life. His role as school superintendent impacted me both psychologically and socially.

Art has provided me a way to explore the influence of my family and work though my own biography and memories is not what I want viewers of my art to primarily see after spending time with the work. As has been true for many artists from Picasso to Lucian Freud, by referring to my inner life in an honest way, I hope to create art that speaks to the human condition. While my pieces are very personal in nature, I feel that it is my responsibility as an artist to comment on universal concerns. I support Leo Tolstoy's position of the role of art from his essay "What is Art?" Tolstoy argues that art must create a clear emotional link between the artist and the viewer. Tolstoy believes that this link "infects" the viewer and creates an essential bond or union. This union with others is of central importance. He states, "To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and, having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colours,

sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling—this is the activity of art.” (Ross 1994, 178)

Many artists use personal biography for art. Louise Bourgeois is best known for her use of biography and in particular her mining of memories from childhood. I respond to her use of materials, her strong sculptural aesthetic as well as her content driven pieces. She inspires me more than any other artist. When viewing her art, I feel the same as Jane Tompkins in her article “Me and My Shadow”:

The public-private dichotomy, which is to say, the public-private *hierarchy*, is a founding condition of female suppression. I say to hell with it. The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. That’s all there is to it.... I think people are scared to talk about themselves, that they haven’t got the guts to do it. I think readers want to know about each other. Sometimes, when a writer introduces some personal bit of story into an essay, I can hardly contain my pleasure. I love writers who write about their own experience. I feel I’m being nourished by them. That I can match my own experience up with theirs, feel cousin to them, and say, yes, that’s how it is (Warhol and Herndl 2007, 1104).

I particularly respond to Bourgeois’ “cells.” In her cells, she uses many



Figure 1: Louise Bourgeois, *Cell I* (detail), 1991, Mixed media installation, Dimensions variable Collection of the artist

constructed objects as well as found objects to invoke an emotional environment that relates to her childhood. In *Cell I*, 1991 (Figure 1), she uses embroidery as a key element on the bed in the cell or room. The text is not obscured or hidden in

any way. This provides support for me to use text in an unambiguous manner.

Other artists who inspire me with their use of biography in their work are Kiki Smith and Annette Messenger. I find Kiki Smith's use of materials instructive. She often uses paper, cloth, and objects such as beads in her work. Her subject matter is also very personal and I respond to her use of the body and often taboo or unpleasant subject matter. One piece that combines these elements is *Untitled*, 1993 (Figure 2). I found this piece helpful in planning the layout for my work in *Defect II* (Figure 10). Annette Messenger uses an abundance of text in her work. She obsessively makes lists and catalogs



Figure 2: Kiki Smith, **Untitled**, 1993, Paper and papier-mâché, Life-size, Private collection

every aspect of her life. She also uses materials and techniques often associated with women. An example of this is *My Knitting Manual*, 1972-73. Here, she creates her own knitting manual complete with pictures and thread samples. I identify with her working style in that she seems to make every aspect of her life into a work of art.

Like many other artists who use biographical content, it is my intent to make art that transcends an individual. Personal history acts as a stimulus for content, but my pieces are left ambiguous inviting the viewer to bring their own experiences into the work. Through my

process, I better understand how my experiences relate to something of universal concern—what I thought was unique to me is actually communal. For example, in my

prose piece, “What I Fear” (see page 47), I discuss my fears both large and small. I have been amazed at how many people who read the poem are fearful of many of the same things. The commonality of the fear of the swimming pool drain is especially funny to me since I felt very alone in this fear as a child.

While interested in art and the creative process, I instead choose a scientific path after high school. In 1995, I obtained a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science from Tennessee Technological University. From 1995 to 2008, I held several positions that directly utilized this degree. Some of these jobs include working for J.C. Bradford & Company training stock brokers on financial software, serving as Programmer Analyst at Sverdrup Technology, and functioning as Academic Computing Liaison for Mathematics and Science at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. In 2005, while working as the Director of Research and Sponsored Programs at Northeastern State University (NSU) in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, I completed a Master of Business Administration. In response to this background, my tendency is to take a very systematic approach during the initial stages of creating most pieces before succumbing to the inevitable creative flow that each piece requires. The push and pull between analytical and creative ways of working is a vital part of my process. *Control*, 2010 (Figures 6 and 7), a large-scale quilt, is an example of how my scientific and business background influences my aesthetic as well as my process. The structure of *Control* is a grid with repetition used as an essential element. The individual cells of birth control packs refer to days in a calendar and are used in a manner reminiscent of binary code—an endless list of zeroes and ones. While creating this object, I often felt as if I was stuck in one of my own programming loops.

My experience as a woman in computer science and business also influences how I see the world and my approach to art. While at GSU, I was introduced to the work of the feminist writer, bell hooks. In her book *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, she explains integration as opposed to adaptation when she cites Freire,

The integrated person is person as Subject. In contrast, the adaptive person is person as object, adaptation representing at most a weak form of self-defense. If man is incapable of changing reality, he adjusts himself instead. Adaptation is behavior characteristic of the animal sphere; exhibited by man, it is symptomatic of his dehumanization (hooks 1989, 67).

After reading this I realized that, like many women in male dominated fields, I survived mostly by adaptation. During my studies at GSU, I took a women and gender studies class which helped me come to understand terms such as integration and adaption. Through my research, I discovered these idioms relate to my past as well as my work as an artist. Having come to terms with how adaption has played out in my work interactions, I am now working to expect integration—which implies that both the individual (me) and process are continually in flux. This biased structure is called into question in my art which will often unintentionally address my personal experience with this struggle between integration and adaption.

Feminist writing has expanded my view of gender and has helped me find my voice through providing powerful examples and role models that in turn act as the basis for the conceptual framework for some of my thesis work. In *Odalisque*, 2010 (Figure 23), the figure of the typical odalisque is broken down to only the vagina. This bronze casting is from a sweet potato that looked uncannily like a vagina. Though a serious piece with a serious message, many viewers find this piece humorous. Even adults are made

uncomfortable at times by body parts or perfectly natural bodily functions. During the making of this piece, I was reading “The Laugh of the Medusa” by Hélène Cixous which showed me how humor can serve as a vehicle to pull people into a work of art. While *Odalisque* is not in my thesis show, a similar piece, *Butterfly Girl*, 2010 (Figure 22), is in the show. In this piece, the bronze casting is contained in an antique jar and appears to be sinking into black sand. This allowed for a more ambiguous representation of the object and is more personal for me as it invokes the childhood memory of collecting butterflies. Another piece conceptually influenced by women and gender studies reading is *Expectations*, 2010 (Figure 11). In this piece, it was my choice to use a picture of my mother taken during the fitting for her wedding dress in order to comment on the expectations of women of her generation. *Expectations* is also an example of how I pull from my family experiences to address larger social concerns. Aesthetically, *Expectations* is similar to a group of medicine cabinets I made in the fall of 2011. In *Constrained*, 2010 (Figure 5), another medicine cabinet, an x-ray of a woman taken while still wearing her bra is encased in a broken medicine cabinet that has been wired closed. In all these pieces, I explore the sometimes confining nature of femininity.

Though some of my thesis work is influenced by my reading of feminist theory, it is not my intent to make feminist statements with my art. Nor do I want to make work that addresses feminist theory. Yet I am a woman. When I make work that relates to my personal biography, as a woman, aspects of feminist thought can be found throughout all of my pieces. While my pieces don’t consciously start as a feminist statement, because they refer to my experiences as a woman, it is possible for viewers to interpret them as having a feminist message. Whether I am making work concerning a childhood

experience or about my experience as a woman, my overarching goal is to speak to the human condition. Only when each of us understands our own story can we empathize with and understand the universal story.

I believe that the most important thing that the MFA has given me is my voice. As bell hooks states in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*,

The fear of exposure, the fear that one's deepest emotions and innermost thoughts will be dismissed as mere nonsense, felt by so many young girls keeping diaries, holding and hiding speech, seems to me now one of the barriers that women have always needed and still need to destroy so that we are no longer pushed into secrecy or silence (1989, 7).

I still have an ongoing struggle with this and it helped to read about hook's experiences. Sometimes I wonder whether I can ever overcome the silencing. I really identified with the quote she included from one of her students:

Those who do not share my eyes cannot see where to tread lightly on me. I am afraid. I am, and will always be afraid. My fear is that I will not be understood. I try to learn the vocabulary of my friends to ensure my communication on their terms. There is no singular vocabulary of 120 people. I will be misunderstood; I will not be respected as a speaker; they will name me Stupid in their minds; they will disregard me. I am afraid (1989, 17).

I think art has gone a long way with helping me find my voice and to help me overcome this fear. It will be a life-long process.

Throughout the MFA program, I have taken several graduate poetry and creative writing classes that have turned out to be a major influence on my work. Through these classes I found many women poets and writers who inspire my work—Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, Mary Oliver, Sylvia Plath, Mary Karr, Gertrude Stein and Audre Lorde to name just a few. All of these writers use biography and personal experience as content for their work. While I usually use their writings as a general source of inspiration, in

Substance in a Cushion (Bad Habit), 2011 (Figure 8), I use Gertrude Stein's piece by the same name directly in my work. While working on this piece, I was taking a Flash Prose writing class and found the Stein prose to mirror the emotional content that I was trying to convey in the piece.

A SUBSTANCE IN A CUSHION.

The change of color is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared. Sugar is not a vegetable.

Callous is something that hardening leaves behind what will be soft if there is a genuine interest in there being present as many girls as men. Does this change. It shows that dirt is clean when there is a volume.

A cushion has that cover. Supposing you do not like to change, supposing it is very clean that there is no change in appearance, supposing that there is regularity and a costume is that any the worse than an oyster and an exchange. Come to season that is there any extreme use in feather and cotton. Is there not much more joy in a table and more chairs and very likely roundness and a place to put them.

A circle of fine card board and a chance to see a tassel.

What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it. The question does not come before there is a quotation. In any kind of place there is a top to covering and it is a pleasure at any rate there is some venturing in refusing to believe nonsense. It shows what use there is in a whole piece if one uses it and it is extreme and very likely the little things could be dearer but in any case there is a bargain and if there is the best thing to do is to take it away and wear it and then be reckless be reckless and resolved on returning gratitude.

Light blue and the same red with purple makes a change. It shows that there is no mistake. Any pink shows that and very likely it is reasonable. Very likely there should not be a finer fancy present. Some increase means a calamity and this is the best preparation for three and more being together. A little calm is so ordinary and in any case there is sweetness and some of that.

A seal and matches and a swan and ivy and a suit.

A closet, a closet does not connect under the bed. The band if it is white and black, the band has a green string. A sight a whole sight and a little groan grinding makes a trimming such a sweet singing trimming and a red thing not a round thing but a white thing, a red thing and a white thing.

The disgrace is not in carelessness nor even in sewing it comes out out of the way.

What is the sash like. The sash is not like anything mustard it is not like a same thing that has stripes, it is not even more hurt than that, it has a little top. (Stein 1914, 1-2)

Poetry and prose writing has provided another outlet for expressing myself. More importantly it has turned out to be a key way to generate ideas for my pieces. In much the same way as Louise Bourgeois and many of the writers that have inspired me, I am able to use my childhood memories and relationships as well as past professional experience as emotional fodder for my art. The conceptual basis for much of my work uses personal experience to address themes of identity and societal expectations of gender. Over time, I have incorporated writing as a key component in my art. I have discovered that, for me, writing and art creation are inseparable.

One of my favorite pieces to date is *Five*, 2010 (Figures 3 and 4). In *Five*, I invoke a childhood memory of being bullied on the school bus when I was five. While on the bus, an older boy day after day would roll his eyelids up over themselves so that his eyeballs protruded from his head and stare at me over the seat. At five, this was terrifying and I felt powerless to do anything about the situation. It was during the making of this piece that writing first became part of my artistic process. While working on the visual representation of this memory, a poem, "Eye Exam (see page 23), emerged that explores the same subject from an adult perspective. Writing the poem helped me to remember details about the personal experience that I could draw from when making the artwork.

I became more comfortable with using writing as a primary element while making *Sure*, 2011 (Figures 12 and 13). Dispersed throughout the 70 pages is the autobiographical poem of the same name (see page 34). In this piece, I explore the bewildering nature of puberty and my relationship with my parents during this time. Visually, the abstract paintings throughout the book show the psychological impact a lack of information had on me at this time. The text of the poem gives the viewer more information and relays how I became more and more fearful that I was dying of cancer instead of experiencing a normal part of growing up. While this piece evokes a very specific part of my childhood, viewers certainly have their own experiences with this time in their life to bring to this work.

Exploring childhood themes through art has provided a powerful way to find my voice. Feminist readings have provided support for me in this process. In the end, however, writing has been the primary tool that I have used to build my body of work. Writing is a necessary way of uncovering memories and exploring them in a deeper way in order to reveal the emotional components I want to represent visually. Poetry and prose helps me flesh out these often painful topics. Once I became aware of and understood the importance of this process, I began to pare my older work down to the most fundamental parts to explore these pieces in a new way. Moving forward, writing helps me drill down sooner to the essence of the piece and helps me to clarify the content before I express it visually.

CHAPTER 2

CREATIVE WRITING AND IMAGES OF WORK



Figure 3: Kate Felzien, *Five*, 2010, Acrylic, watercolor, found objects on canvas, 51 ½ x 80 x 6 ½ in.



Figure 4: Kate Felzien, *Five (detail)*, 2010, Acrylic, watercolor, found objects on canvas, 51 ½ x 80 x 6 ½ in.

EYE EXAM

I see you every year at the eye doctor
in the charts of diseases
corneas on display. I wonder
if you've bullied your way

 same confidence
as at ten—waiting with eyelids
peeled back
revealing the puffy pink insides.
Glossy leering eyeballs white
as jawbreakers from
the Marvin Gardens convenience store
just up from the school bus stop.

I am a good candidate
for Lasik surgery—but I am not ready
eyelids pulled back in clamps
thin ray shaping
 how I see

Un Chien Andalou.



Figure 5: Kate Felzien, *Constrained*, 2010, Acrylic, x-ray, found objects, 16 x 31 x 5 ¾ in.



Figure 6: Kate Felzien, *Control*, 2010, Watercolor, *paper*, ribbon, cloth, 84 x 96 in.



Figure 7: Kate Felzien, *Control (detail)*, 2010, Watercolor, paper, ribbon, cloth, 84 x 96 in.



Figure 8: Kate Felzien, *Substance in a Cushion (Bad Habit)* (detail), 2011, Watercolor, ink, cloth, wood, 15 ¼ x 7 x 5 in.



Figure 9: Kate Felzien, *Defect I*, 2010, Paper, thread, cloth, found objects, 15 x 80 x 13 in.



Figure 10: Kate Felzien, *Defect II* (installation view), 2011, Watercolor, ink, cloth, thread, glassine paper, Dimensions variable.

TEETH LIKE MINE

I heard today on National Geographic that you can trace
where a person is from through their teeth—where I come from
sealed in enamel
before braces faced the gap—wide enough to spit
a stream across the swimming pool on a sticky Tennessee day
teeth that mouth Just as I Am and speak softly and tenderly and
stand apart like columns
 betraying roots—now veneered
as coca-cola cake at the pot luck after a teeth grinding revival
blue tooth violets on the windowsill in the kitchen chattering
in front of the air conditioner in the den feeling
clenched fingers in cheeks
above
 a smile
so like mine
it hurts.



Figure 11: Kate Felzien, *Expectations*, 2010, Encaustic, watercolor, acrylic, found objects, 13 x 75 x 3 in.



Figure 12:

Top: Kate Felzien, *Mother* (installation view), 2011, Watercolor, ink, ribbon, cloth, thread, 21 x 21 in.

Bottom: Kate Felzien, *Sure* (installation view), 2011, Watercolor, ink, paper, bronze, cloth, 3 ½ x 8 x in.



Figure 13: Kate Felzien, *Sure (detail)*, 2011, Watercolor, ink, paper, bronze, cloth, 3 ½ x 8 x 3 in.

SURE

Cancer. She's sure she's got it—she looked it up: cells
growing like bird seed inside.

She plans the service—who will preach, the guest list, the flowers
 roses not carnations (they smell too much like funerals)
Mr. Moony
her first.

She imagines seeing her name in print
 in the church bulletin among the other cancer victims.
At least she's saved—again. It was worth the public spectacle
just to be sure.

Sneaking down the hall to the dirty clothes basket she digs around inside
thin silky briefs—her mother always wears white ones
from Woolworths. She holds them like one of her pinned butterflies
examining the label
smelling the crotch:

cancer.
for sure

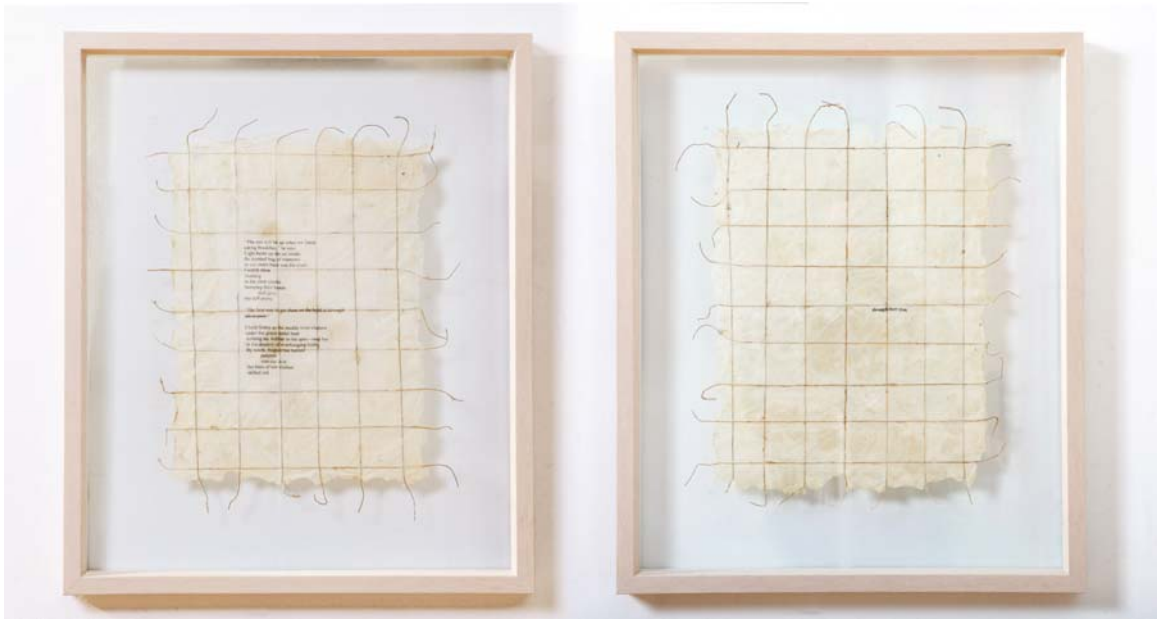


Figure 14:

Left: Kate Felzien, *Fishing Trip* (installation view), 2011, Ink, pencil, cloth on oil paper, 15 x 18 in.

Right: Kate Felzien, *Through their Eyes* (installation view), 2011, Ink, cloth on oil paper, 15 x 18 in.

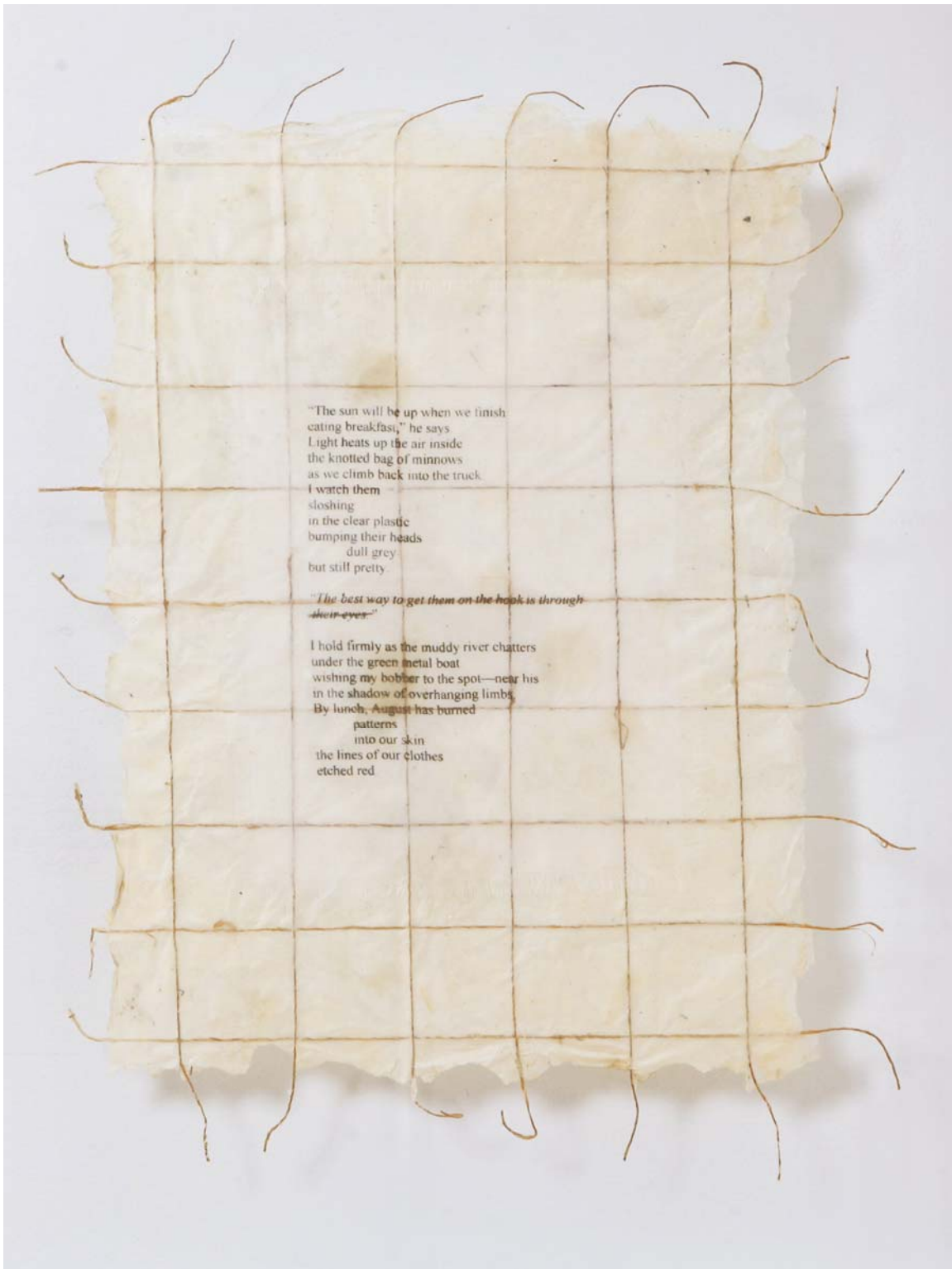


Figure 15: Kate Felzien, *Fishing Trip* (detail), 2011, Ink, pencil, cloth on oil paper, 15 x 18 in.

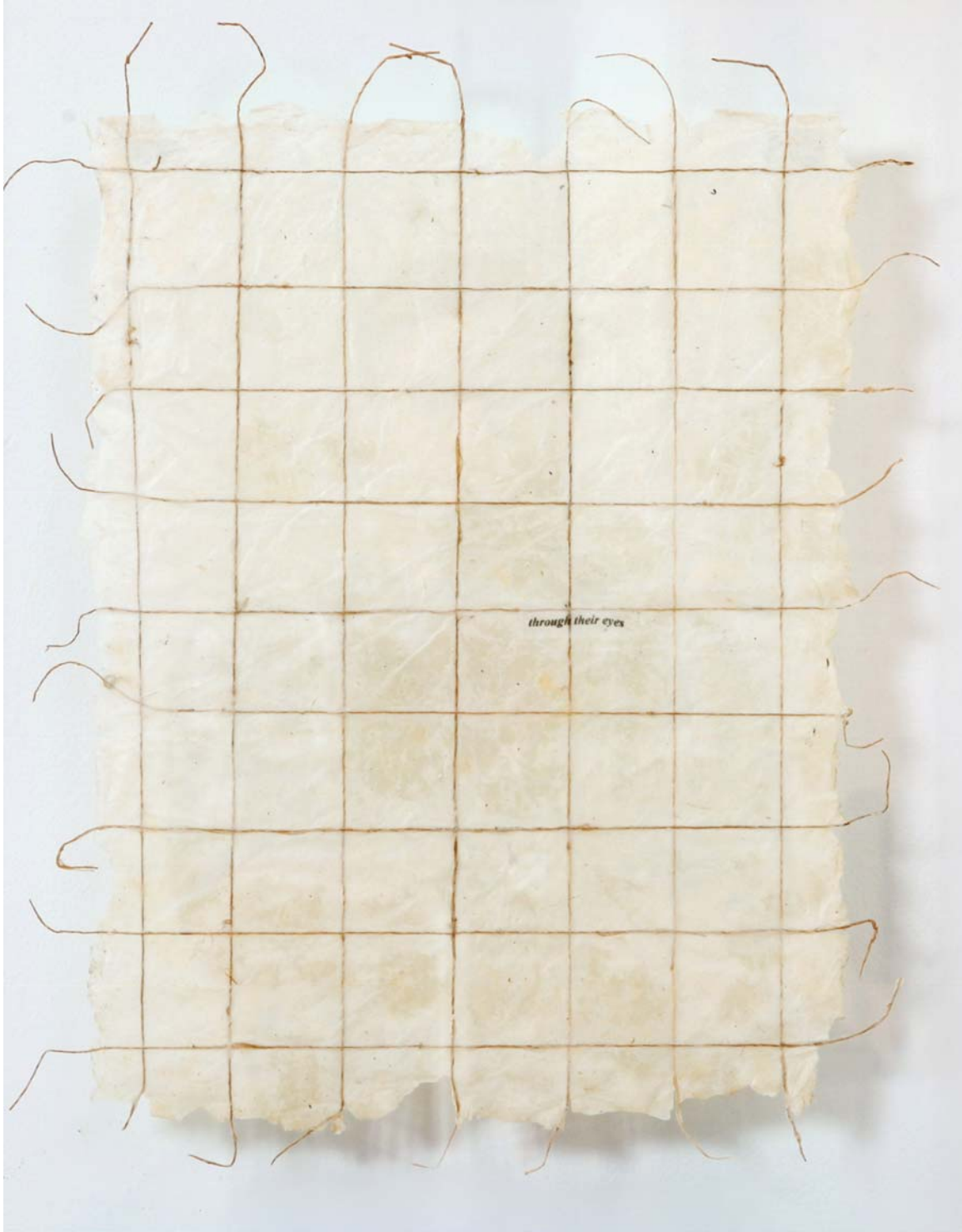


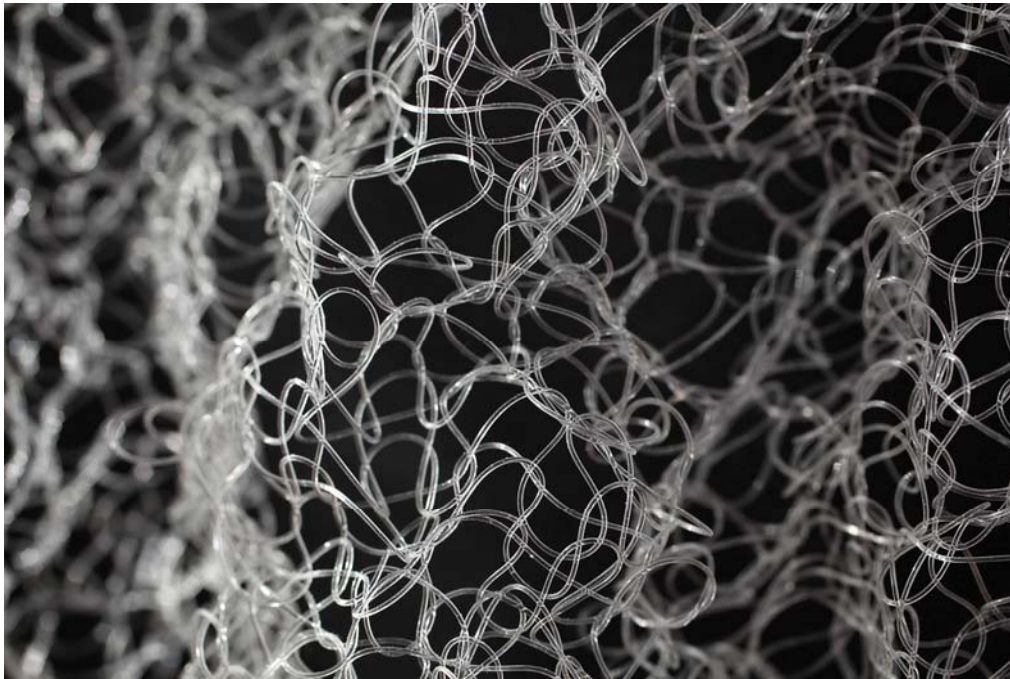
Figure 16: Kate Felzien, *Through their Eyes* (detail), 2011, Ink, cloth on oil paper, 15 x 18 in.

FISHING TRIP

“The sun will be up when we finish
eating breakfast,” he says.
Light heats up the air inside
the knotted bag of minnows
as we climb back into the truck.
I watch them
sloshing
in the clear plastic
bumping their heads
dull grey
but still pretty.

*“The best way to get them on the hook is through
their eyes.”*

I hold firmly as the muddy river chatters
under the green metal boat
wishing my bobber to the spot—near his
in the shadow of overhanging limbs.
By lunch, August has burned
patterns
into our skin
the lines of our clothes
etched red.



Top:

Figure 17: Kate Felzien, *Starched White Curtains (installation view)*, 2011, Knitted fishing line, cord, 18 x 84 in.

Bottom:

Figure 18: Kate Felzien, *Starched White Curtains (detail)*, 2011, Knitted fishing line, cord, 18 x 84 in.



Figure 19:

Top: Kate Felzien, *Help* (installation view), 2011, Watercolor, ink, pencil on cloth, 13 x 16 in.

Bottom: Kate Felzien, *Blue Meditation* (installation view), 2011, Encaustic on panel, 16 x 20 in.

Help

I was nine the night I saw my grandmother die. I was holding her hand. Daddy had brought her home to get her off of the nerve pills. He put her in my brother's room. It was the room where everything died—the hermit crab, several goldfish, and the hive of bees in the chimney over the closet. That night the screaming got really loud. “Help me, help me.” She laid in the small twin bed her fleshy arms moving in waves. Skin reflective as the mirrors she used for lakes under the tiny glass animals in the bathroom. Through all the sweat, she still smelled like White Shoulders. Holding her hand, I listened to her mumbling breath, Mama crying in the den, “Chips” on TV. Later, I tried to go to sleep, but she was shrieking. “Mary Kate, Mary Kate, Mary Kate.”

Afterwards, they took her to a retirement home. She did well there. She grew a small garden and didn't do anything crazy or cause any more problems. When she passed away I bought a rose to put in her hand, but I couldn't look at her.



Top:

Figure 20: Kate Felzien, *First Man on the Moon*, 2011, Ink, pencil, cloth, found objects on my grandfather's shoes, 9 x 3 ½ x 3 ½ in.

Bottom:

Figure 21: Kate Felzien, *First Man on the Moon (detail)*, 2011, Ink, pencil, cloth, found objects on my grandfather's shoes, 9 x 3 ½ x 3 ½ in.

Regrets

My grandparents never divorced. They didn't believe in it. But, their relationship was volatile—at least for a Southern Baptist couple of the 50's. My grandmother died when I was fifteen and I had never known them to live together or even visit at the same time. I have only one glimpse into their relationship. I was sixteen and was driving my grandfather in the used 1980 Honda Accord. It was brown and looked like a serious person's car. It was the first real claim to who I wanted to be—before the belt broke and burned out the engine. We were going to visit my great aunt, my grandmother's sister. It felt very adult to be driving him there. Usually time with him was spent doing something indulgent and frivolous. As long as I could remember, my grandmother and great aunt had lived together and she was like another grandmother to me. My grandfather and she could be cordial. We were driving down Memorial, he looked unusually tired. He had been leading Boy Scouts for over 50 years by then and even that day he wore freshly laundered green scout pants and a tucked in "Ole 97" t-shirt. He silk screened them himself. The only hint of old age was his polished Florsheim shoes. At the light by the Old Hickory Mall he looked over at me as we waited. "You know, I never finished that footstool I promised your grandmother."



Figure 22: Kate Felzien, *Butterfly Girl*, 2010, Bronze, sand in found jar, 17 x 14 ½ x 11 in.



Figure 23: Kate Felzien, *Odalisque (detail)*, 2010, Bronze, cloth, found objects, 21 ½ x 14 x 3 ¾ in.

Mary Kathryn

I would like to say that my mother was going through her “Catholic phase,” but I still see her in the red velvet pew—fifth from the front of the North Jackson Baptist Church. Her dark brown hair pulled back, there is no grey yet. She is wearing a starched ruffled blouse—the kind you get from Laura Ashley and a brown plaid skirt hemmed to fall in the middle of her shins. Taupe pantyhose with taupe heels just the right height. Is my father leading the singing this day or is he off on some other duty that inevitably lands on the head deacon? The bulletin lists the service: “Be Careful With What You Think You Know (John 3:1-17)”.

Kate

August 3, 1979: There is a new store in the Old Hickory Mall. It is called “Names and Things.” I search frantically through the shoe strings. My name is not there. I find Mary.

July 8, 2011: I wish I had a sister. Magdalene Clare.

What I fear:

Discovering that someone once died in the bedroom of the house I just bought.

Getting my fingers caught in the swimming pool drain.

Cracks between the starched white curtains at bedtime.

Believing that my soul will live forever.

And that I really am responsible for my dad sawing off the tip of his left ring finger after he found out I was living with my boyfriend.

Not being smart enough and everyone finding out.

Someone I don't know yet growing inside my body.

The sour sweet smell of bees dying in the chimney.

Expiration dates.

Staying in a city I don't love.

Dying alone in a city of strangers.

Not enough darkness to see the Ring Nebula from my telescope in the backyard.

Missing something.

NOTE TO COMPUTER SCIENCE PROFESSOR

When my world could fill a church pew
you entered with armed precision
pressed pants
linked lists
C plus pluses
aggressive ones
submissive zeros
the quote of the day
always the same
reminding us that now was the time
for all good men—
what to be done with that
me in my flats and oversized tweed jacket
so man-like.

I sometimes wonder whether you have gone
for that last cup of coffee where
you do not remember me
zero
I know
but
you have not won
I remember
your pressed pants
none of your linked lists
C plus plusses—
I fight
aggressive ones
submit to some zeros
see more.

Programming
can be undone.



Top:

Figure 24: Kate Felzien, *Let's Hear It for the Boy*, 2011, Acrylic, watercolor, ink, cloth on canvas, 15 x 60 in.

Bottom:

Figure 25: Kate Felzien, *Let's Hear It for the Boy (detail)*, 2011, Acrylic, watercolor, ink, cloth on canvas, 15 x 60 in.

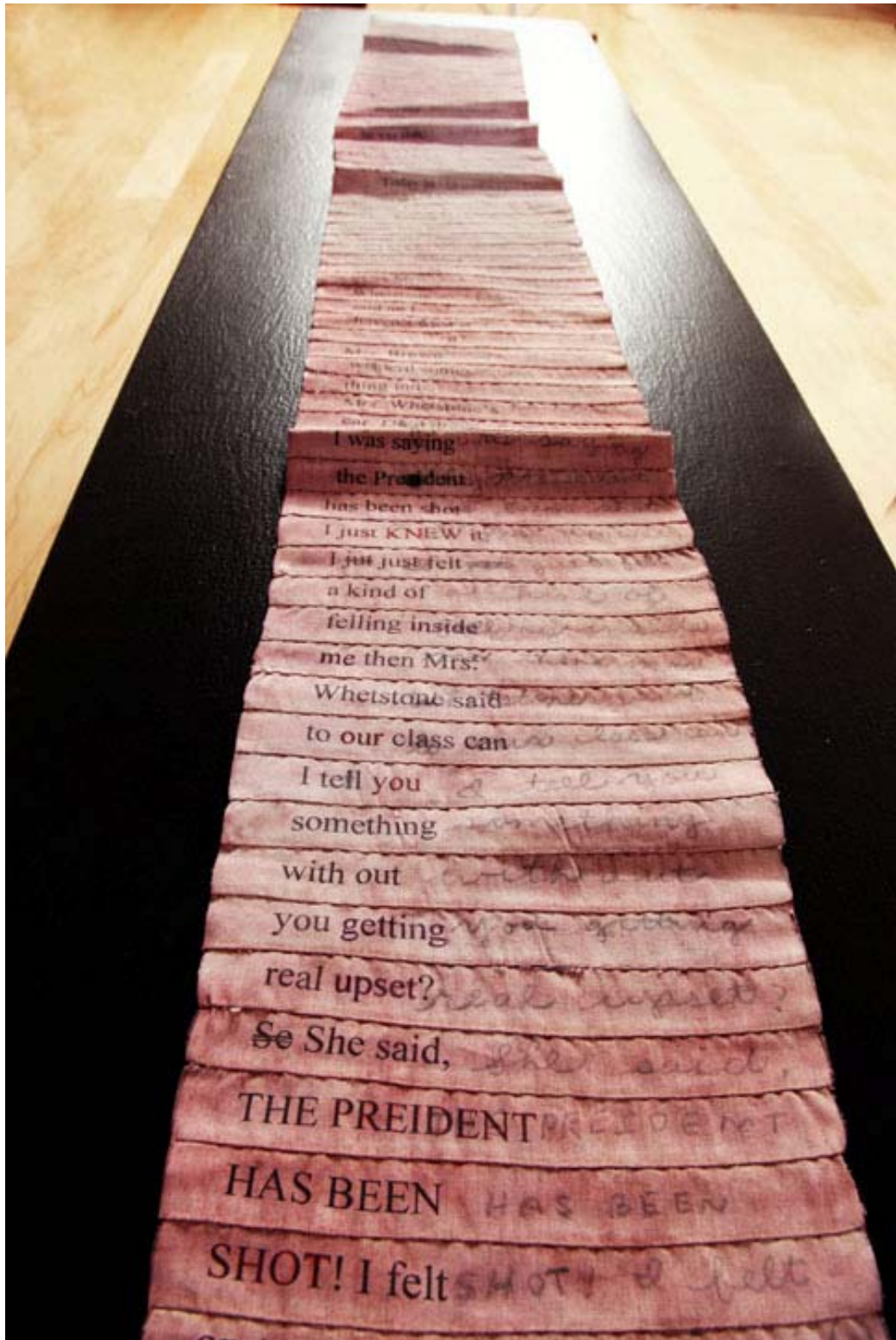


Figure 26: Kate Felzien, *March 30, 1981 (detail)*, 2011, Watercolor, ink, pencil, thread on cloth, 7 x 72 in.



Figure 27: Kate Felzien, *Maxine and Liz*, 2010, Acrylic, encaustic, watercolor, cloth, found objects on canvas, 23 x 80 x 3 ½ in.

CHAPTER 3

DESCRIPTION OF WORK

While stylistically similar, the body of work used for my MFA Thesis Exhibition varies widely in materials and process. I do not consider myself either a painter or a sculptor although I draw from both art forms when making my art. I am also influenced by assemblage and installation. Mark Rosenthal describes installation as follows: “In this new kind of art [installation], the integrity of and focus on an individual work are abandoned in favor of a multiplicity of objects, images, and experiences, which spew forth without regard for isolation (Rosenthal 2003, 25).” I rarely approach works in a singular way. I make objects that inform each other and can then go together to create an integrated whole. In this chapter, I will describe my process and conceptual framework.

Rosenthal further explains installation, “The filled space is usually more literary or psychologically inclined—concerned with artifice, private reality, enchantment, or idealization—even as it is experienced in real time (2003, 28).” My work is primarily concerned with exploring the psychological effects created by my childhood as well as literary concerns using writing to delve into the subconscious and explore psychological conditions of my childhood. I identify with Louise Bourgeois when she states

My childhood has never lost its magic, it has never lost its mystery, and it has never lost its drama. All my work of the last fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood...Some of us are so obsessed with the past that we die of it. It is the attitude of the poet who never finds the lost heaven and it is really the situation of artists who work for a reason that nobody can quite grasp. They might want to reconstruct something of the past to exorcise it. It is that the past for certain people has such a hold and such a beauty...Everything I do was inspired by my early life...Everyday you have to abandon your past or accept it and then if you cannot accept it you become a sculptor (Morris 2008, 80-81).

This quote for me sums up the reasons I make art. Childhood will always be the framework to which I attach all of my experiences. It is the filter through which I view the world and in turn my art.

Inspiration for my pieces often comes from my everyday environment, where I am drawn to the historical and cultural information contained in these found objects and often respond to them in relation to a personal memory. *Control*, 2010 evolved in this way. In this particular piece, while strolling through one of the many local antique stores, I was drawn to a small, worn iron bed (Figure 28). The paint had peeled away to expose an already rusting frame and as I looked closer it quickly reminded me of the bed I slept



Figure 28: Kate Felzien, *Control (installation view on bed)*, 2010, Watercolor, paper, ribbon, cloth, found objects, 60 x 48 x 80 in.

in as a young girl. This bed was a psychologically rich object for me as my own childhood bed was the same one my father slept in when he himself was a child. I could not leave this object behind and thought it would serve as an evocative environment to display a quilt dealing with birth control—a very intimate and adult concern. The strict Southern Baptist household I grew up in made sex an unacknowledged

aspect of identity and this quilt represents part of the struggle I have had with coming to

terms with this part of myself. As I continued to work on this piece, I eventually chose to present the quilt on the wall rather than on the bed (Figure 6). On the wall, the viewer is confronted with the full scale of the piece when walking into the gallery. While the bed is not physically present in my thesis show, it is psychologically present.

With *Control*, I was also transported to a time of making “yo-yo” quilts with my mother. This idea sparked the creation of this particular piece, where I use over 2,000 individually embossed and painted watercolor sections in creating a full sized quilt. The pieces in this quilt are embossed with the design of a birth control pack and then sewn onto an indigo blue, silky backing. The roughly circular shape and way of attaching the circles together remind me of the yo-yo pattern. Looking at the hundreds of white individual sections strewn across the kitchen table I was torn on what color scheme would work best in expressing the visual feel of this project. I was again taken back to my childhood where I would hide under a worn indigo blue blanket for security. The quilt is 84 x 96 inches and is made using a variety of techniques. For materials, I used a roll of watercolor paper, watercolors, silk ribbon, and a bolt of blue silky fabric that I found at a yard sale for the backing. Watercolor is one of my favorite media and the ability to be able to dampen and then shape the individual pieces was important to make the pieces look like the birth control containers. Colors I worked with were indigo blue, Payne’s grey, cobalt turquoise and burnt sienna. Indigo blue is a very cool color and I chose it to represent the clinical way I sometimes have to look at sex. Sex and reproduction often become a game of counting. After all the pieces were attached, I went back and painted numbers (1-31 to represent the days of the month) on some squares in indigo blue acrylic paint (Figure 7).

While making this quilt, I attended an art exhibition of quilts made by Faith Ringgold. At this exhibition, I was able to observe her use of painting on fabric as well as her use of color and design. I was also inspired by her ability to speak to her biography as well as address larger societal concerns through her quilts. Seeing the presentation of her quilts hung simply on the wall further supported my decision to remove the bed in *Control*.

Another piece where I use the grid as a foundation is *Five*, 2010 (Figure 3). The support is a 48 x 48 inch stretched 1-inch thick gallery wrapped canvas. The same black



Figure 29: Robert Rauschenberg, *First Landing Jump*, 1961, Combine painting, 89 x 72 x 9 in., Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York

and white image of me stepping off the school bus when I was five has been applied in a gridded pattern to a pale pink ground. Only a small part of the bus can be seen but the steps leading off of the school bus, the open bus door and the bus tire is prominent in the picture. The bus number, "5," is also a prominent part of the picture.

The pictures are applied using acrylic transfer. This process is important to

me because it is a repetitive and reductive process. I enjoy scraping the

paper from the acrylic medium in order to reveal the image left by the photocopied photo.

This technique was also made popular by Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg is another

artist who breaks down the distinction between art and life. He literally places bits and pieces from his life such as boyhood clothing into his “combines.” Photography is also a primary device for Rauschenberg and his melding of images. Looking at Rauschenberg’s work and pieces such as *First Landing Jump*, 1961 (Figure 29) provided support for me to make many of the choices I made in *Five*.

After application by acrylic transfer, the pictures have been scratched and painted over with sepia watercolor (Figure 4). Some pictures are completely visible while others are almost completely obscured. The bottom left quadrant is almost completely covered by tar applied in a circular pattern. On top of the gridded pictures, a cut school bus tire has been bolted to the canvas by 11 rusty $\frac{3}{4}$ inch bolts with “ABC” in raised letters manufactured into the bolt. The tire has been worn in places exposing the steel inside the tire. This produces a sharp and jagged texture yet the tire is also visually soft and winglike. A small light bulb on a dark red painted cord has been threaded through the tire and can be turned on by a red pull chain. Ribbon cascades from the bottom of the V-shaped tire and pools a few inches onto the floor. The ribbon starts pink and is dyed progressively darker from maroon to brown.

I chose sepia for this piece because, when applied transparently, it ages the images. It is important in this piece as well as many of my other pieces to use aging as a technique for conveying a passage of time. Aging becomes a visible cue to the viewer that the experience represented by the visual image happened in the past and is now seen through the filter of time. Tar was used in this piece for many of the same reasons, however, I also appreciated the connections of tar to roadways. Pink is also a strong part of this piece and I used it for its traditional associations with young girls.

While making this piece I attended an artist talk by Chakaia Booker. While her reasons for using tires as material are vastly different from mine, I appreciated how she cut and attached tires to make “in the round” as well as wall pieces. She was an excellent example of fully exploring a material. Thinking about my art and especially the piece *Five*, I was able to think more deeply about tires as a material for art.

Maxine and Liz, 2010 (Figure 27) also relies on a tire to define my aesthetic as well as to carry content. In many ways, this piece is a culmination of my early exploration of materials and my use of found objects. Many diverse elements are found in this relatively small, 23 inch wide work: acrylic, encaustic, watercolor, cloth, antique glass photo negative (stereotype), a tire, a light and electric cord, and canvas. This piece is named after my maternal grandmother and great aunt as the glass stereotype reminded me of how I pictured them as little girls.

Another transitional piece is *Let's Hear It for the Boy*, 2011 (Figures 24 and 25) where I sought to abandon the found object and clarify my content. Throughout my work on this piece, I tried to pair the gridded canvas with several objects such as an actual piano keyboard and a dress form. In the end, I found that the gridded canvas of me playing the piano as a child was enough to express the day to day patterns of my childhood.

Up to this point, use of found objects would help me begin a piece. After taking creative writing courses, the poems and prose pieces I wrote started to become a more authentic way for me to approach a piece. Writing allows me to explore an idea deeply before expanding the idea into imagery. A change in approach to making work for my thesis exhibition began with *Defect II*, 2011 (Figure 10) where I began to question my use

of found objects and the weight that they had in my work. *Defect II* is a re-exploration of an earlier work *Defect I*, 2010 (Figure 9) which relies heavily on several found objects. In *Defect II*, I discovered that my use of the found object could be eliminated, thus allowing me to explore conceptual content more deeply. It also allowed me to better showcase and bring out the handmade elements of the original work. In *Defect II*, I explore the ramification of the intestinal birth defect I discussed in Chapter 1 and the psychological impact it had on me as a child. In this piece I realized how over the years the defect has become intertwined with my relationship with my father. On one occasion he offhandedly commented that he thought this was the reason I was so introverted as a child—I had spent a vast amount of time in isolation after birth recovering from surgery. When I was thinking about working on a piece about this birth defect, I remembered this comment and was able to make this connection. *Defect II* works better because it feels more true to my feelings about both my defect and my relationship with my father. It is more successful in stripping everything away except the essential elements.

In looking deeper into this father-daughter relationship, my poem “Teeth Like Mine” (see page 30) became one of the major pieces in my thesis exhibition—as part of my artist statement as well as the writing found on *Defect II*. The poem is written on long glassine strips of paper cut into 3 ¾” wide strips. These strips are then folded and sewn together to produce a 256 yard continuous strip. The words are printed on cloth and sewn onto the glassine strip with pink and white thread. For me, the strip loosely represents intestines (part of my birth defect). I chose to arrange the piece in a loosely disemboweled state—beginning on the wall and stretched out across the gallery this way there is no obvious pattern to the arrangement of the words. Allowing this tendril of poem

to cascade across the floor in a manner that disorganizes the reading of the poem could also be read as the still psychologically “messy” relationship I have with my father.

In contrast to *Defect II*, another piece in my exhibition, *Mother*, 2011 (Figure 12), is very ordered and meticulously arranged. I wind 950 yards of 1 ½” wide double-sided black satin ribbon into an 21 by 21 inch circle. Layered onto the ribbon is writing taken from one of my mother’s journals that she gave to me in 1999. During this time, our relationship was broken as a result of my decision to live with my now husband before marriage. In the journal, there is very little mention made of the situation at hand. Instead, it chronicles her garden, daily life, and favorite Bible verses. When she gave me the journal I was very disappointed and angry about the lack of content concerning her true feelings. Now that I am older, I can appreciate it as an attempt to connect with me, however, it remains a potent symbol of the shallow relationship we still have. *Mother* demonstrates the importance of writing for me. The text in this piece is important even though the viewer does not see it.

The choice of material used to make *Mother* is also very meaningful to this piece. My mother ties a ribbon on almost anything around her. She will put one around the neck of her pet goose, Ned ; on her car keys which she keeps under the driver’s seat; in her hair though she is 60; scotch taped on my bald head as a baby; the list goes on. A good memory of my mother is coming across a store in Memphis that sold ribbon for a dollar a bag. We stood for hours in the store pulling ribbon out of a big bin and winding it into the tightest rolls possible so that we could fit as much as we could in the bag. Her favorite colors of ribbon are black, brown, and pink. While black is heavily laden with built-in content, it is the color that most symbolizes my mother to me. It is the color she chooses

most to tie around objects. Also, it was a cause for excitement when the “ribbon bin” the dollar a bag ribbon store had black in it. In *Mother*, I make a literal connection to this memory of winding ribbon with my mother, however, the work is left open purposefully for viewers to make their own connections and observations about the piece. With this piece, winding, what is hidden and what is revealed, is used in a universal way.

The first piece where I almost entirely shed the art object itself is *Help*, 2011 (Figure 19). *Help* is a prose piece (see page 41) printed on 100% cotton, watermarked paper. Layered over it is cloth printed with a few lines of the prose for emphasis. The image has then been minimally marked and painted on to emphasize the parts that are most troubling to me. The piece is framed in a white frame and the glass is recessed to draw in the viewer as well as to convey helplessness by making the paper seem vulnerable and withdrawn into the wall. In this text image, I explore a specific memory of my maternal grandmother. When I was about nine, my father brought her home to detox from valium. This had a deep psychological impact on me as I watched her process through the steps of drug withdrawal. As a child, I was very protective of my family emotionally. I felt an obligation to sit with my grandmother during this time.

Although not made together, I decided to display *Blue Meditation*, 2011 (Figure 19) with *Help* in my MFA thesis show. The feeling invoked in *Blue Meditation* echoes the mood for *Help* and they support each other. *Blue Meditation* is an abstract image using indigo blue, phthalo blue, light blue, violet, black, and white encaustic paint. The paint is laid on in layers and while still warm I scrape and press the layers together. This process allows for an abstract image to emerge as I make decisions about when to scrape and when to leave a section in the final image. I enjoy this process in much the same way

as I enjoy watercolor. Not having complete control over the final image is very important to me and I use this method to free my creative process and often as a way of breaking patterns or structures in my work.

Use of the sometimes obsessive repetition in my process can also be seen in *Starched White Curtains*, 2011 (Figures 17 and 18). For this piece, fishing line is knitted to create a 30 x 84 inch piece of stiff material. White cord is threaded through the top to create a limp curtain rod. *Starched White Curtains* started as a response to the poem “Fishing Trip” (see page 38). I wanted to convey the emotional response that I had to fishing with my father. As this piece progressed, I realized that I wanted to represent this content in a more direct way (see *Fishing Trip* and *Through their Eyes* below). As I continued knitting, I began to think about the curtains that hung in my childhood bedroom. Three of the four walls in my childhood bedroom were primarily windows. There were no shades on the windows only eyelet lace, starched, white curtains. The curtains did not always come together well so there were always cracks in between them which was very frightening for me as a child. *Starched White Curtains* is a visual representation of this fear.

Fishing Trip, 2011 (Figures 14 and 15) and *Through Their Eyes*, 2011 (Figures 14 and 16) sheds the physical object completely and instead uses the words themselves as the art object. The poem “Fishing Trip” was the starting point for both of these pieces. In this poem I explore a specific memory of fishing with my father on the Tennessee River near my childhood home. These daily trips started early in the day and confined us together on a small two person boat for hours on end. The poem also explores the overall psychological feel of our relationship and how a pattern of communication was set up

then that still exists in our relationship today. In my thesis show, I chose to show both the full poem and a version which retains only three words of the poem, “through their eyes”. Both versions are printed on silk cloth and layered onto a tan oil cloth paper that has prickly looking sting gridded throughout. Both pieces are framed in a floating sand colored frame.

First Man on the Moon, 2011 (Figure 20) was one of the last pieces I did for my thesis show. While it seems to go back to the found object, it is not in the same manner in that it is more controlled and content driven. *First Man on the Moon* uses my grandfather’s shoes as the base for a character study of him that I started in the prose piece “Regrets” (see page 43). Part of the prose is printed on silk cloth and inserted into one of his shoes (Figure 21). I then installed wheels onto the bottom of the shoe to represent my impressions of my grandfather as a child. The piece is then encased in a vitrine to invoke the feeling of a valued artifact.

March 30, 1981, 2011 (Figure 26) is the last piece I completed in this body of work. As I was making this piece I was thinking about finding my voice—what is voice? How is your child voice different from your adult voice? *March 30, 1981* explores my child voice. The text is taken from my childhood diary written when I was nine years old. The entry is about the shooting of former President Ronald Regan. For this piece, I printed my diary entry on cotton cloth making sure to retain the original line breaks and then sewed them together like a quilt block. This resulted in a long strip of disjointed and anxious feeling prose. Next to the printed version of the text, I also copied my handwriting from my diary onto the strip. This piece is very authentic and immediate to me—traits that I want to continue to foster in my work.

Writing has undoubtedly played a key role in my thesis work. I believe that I will continue to value writing as a prompt for beginning a piece and want to better integrate text into my work. Creative writing pieces in Chapter 2 that I have not yet explored include “Mary Kathryn/Kate,” “What I Fear,” and “Note to Computer Science Professor” (see pages 46-48). I want to work on the visual components to these pieces in the future as well as continue to write and generate new ideas for work.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

My thesis show, *In Context*, explores the role of material and structure. By carefully selecting the elements which comprise my work, I can create specific relationships between an object and experience. Grids and repetition are found throughout my body of work and create a structure for me to act against. I favor materials that are both tactile and less easily controlled. Giving up control relieves some of the obsessional qualities of many of my pieces and serves as a counterpoint to my instinctual way of working.

In my thesis work, I use personal memories and relationships as the starting point for my work. Poetry and prose provide a catalyst for generating and working through ideas before representing them visually. Over time, I have incorporated writing as a key component in my art. For me, writing and art creation are inseparable.

In the future, I want to continue to refine my process and conceptual approach. I would like to explore the grid pattern more deeply and find different ways to disrupt my repetitive elements. Writing will continue to hold the key to developing many of my pieces. I believe that I will always have an overriding concern for expressing the universal human condition in my artwork through my own experiences.

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