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Lightness of Being and the Burden of Gravity

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THE LIGHTNESS OF BEING AND THE BURDEN OF GRAVITY

by

EMY MIXON

(Under the Direction of Jessica Hines)

ABSTRACT

The challenge of the human condition is to bear the loss that comes with every second, moving forward, breathing without thinking; moving forward, through moments that pass so uneventfully that we will not recall them, along with moments that we experience so profoundly that we begin to use them as landmarks in our personal histories. My view of time is of something that surrounds me and becomes a part of my identity. Yet, as I contemplate what it means to “BE,” I must face the constancy with which that being also changes. Regardless of the things that I remember, or that I forget, gravity perpetuates the movement of time. Thus, gravity becomes our greatest burden. Through my writing and research, I explore the dual nature of “being”—and the transient natures of both the intellectual and physical self.

In my thesis exhibition, *The Lightness of Being and The Burden of Gravity*, I employed the medium of video installation in order to provide a space that evoked both the ephemeral and the physical sense of being. In my support paper, I discuss this exhibition in depth, as well as my conceptual connections to literary and artistic influences, such as the writings of Milan Kundera and Jorge Luis Borges, and the work of artists Masao Yamamoto, James Turrell, and Ann Hamilton.

INDEX WORDS: Video, Installation, Milan Kundera, Jorge Luis Borges, Masao Yamamoto, James Turrell, Ann Hamilton

THE LIGHTNESS OF BEING AND THE BURDEN OF GRAVITY

by

EMY MIXON

BS Fine Arts, North Georgia College and State University, 2003

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

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Electronic Version Approved:
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DEDICATION

My work is dedicated to the memory of my Papa, who died during the completion of this paper. He was my kindred spirit and my biggest fan, and it was from him that I learned that the best way to find peace and happiness is to share laughter and joy with every person you meet. I am so glad to have had him in my life and to have shared so many moments, which live in me still. He taught me so much about living, and about loving and taking care of others. Most of the joy in his life was dependant upon the amount of joy that my brother and sisters and I had in ours. I am so thankful for all of the love he gave me and for all of the lessons that he taught me. He was a giant man whose jubilance filled every room that he ever entered. His gigantic love will never die.

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First and foremost I would like to acknowledge my advisor and mentor, Jessica Hines. I once believed that I would never earn her approval or her praise. It is only now that my graduate process has come to an end that I realize there was never an instant that she ceased to believe in my abilities. Jessica saw in me the potential to do more than I thought I was capable of doing, and she taught me to be so passionate about my work that her approval was not necessary and did not define me as an artist. I am so thankful that she did not carry me, but forced me to find my own voice. Jessica is exactly the sort of mentor that I hope to become someday. I sincerely hope to have students who think that I am as mean as I once thought she was. I will know then that I have succeeded as an educator.

I also must acknowledge Julie McGuire and Leigh Thomson, whose support and patience have meant so much. I have never left one of Julie's classes without a new idea to pursue or a thought to explore. I am also grateful to Leigh, for agreeing to be a part of my committee. Her insight and graciousness have been very much appreciated.

I also wish to acknowledge Megan Jacobs, who pushed me to try something new, who has never stopped encouraging me to grow and to never give up. I am so glad to have had the opportunity to work with such a talented artist, and to have such a kind friend.

Last, I wish to acknowledge all of my friends, who have helped carry the burden, and who have filled even the heavy moments with lightness and joy.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

My work is a representation of the idea of *being* as it relates to the concept of the passage of time, and its ability to simultaneously have physical, cerebral, and emotional effects upon our lives, and ultimately, upon the ways that we identify ourselves.

Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges writes in his essay, *A New Refutation of Time*, "Time is the substance from which I am made. Time is a river which carries me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire." (Monegal and Reid, eds., p. 190) Like Borges, my perception of time is that it is something that surrounds us, defines us, and becomes a part of who we are, rather than something that can be fully comprehended by quantification through the expression of seconds, minutes, or hours. Experiences that are attached to moments we speak of add qualitative measures to the numbers that we use to mark history; we are surrounded by the past and the present, and continuously pulled forward into the future. There is a tangible, physical existence to this; gravity is simultaneously a "machine" that moves us through time and space, as well as a burden that determines the physical effects of these things upon our bodies, and the loss that occurs with every moment that passes. In my work, I explore a duality that occurs between the approaches we take toward measuring our lives; the quantification of time, and the qualitative effect that these things have upon our identities.

Through the use of projections, sounds, and materials, my artwork concurrently focuses upon the transient, abstract facet of loss and its connection to the physical, numerable aspect, and how we face these things, as intelligent beings, ever aware of the burden of gravity.

CHAPTER 2
MFA THESIS EXHIBITION

The installation, *The Lightness of Being & The Burden of Gravity* was on exhibit at Georgia Southern University's Contemporary Gallery in the Center For Art and Theatre in Statesboro, Georgia, from November 3, 2008 – December 4, 2008.

The exhibition featured the single-channel video, *The Lightness of Being & The Burden of Gravity*, which was projected onto a backdrop made up of 10,417 pieces of silk.

The inspiration for my final installation came in several different guises, which I will further discuss in subsequent sections of this paper. The initial, and perhaps most important influence for my thesis installation was sparked by a comment made by a character in the film, "The Hours." In the film, one of the characters, a writer who is dying, reflects upon his life and work with a close friend:

"I wanted to write about it all. Everything that happens in a moment. The way the flowers looked when you carried them in your arms. This towel, how it smells, how it feels, this thread. All our feelings, yours and mine. The history of it, who we once were. Everything in the world. Everything all mixed up..." (Rudin, Fox, & Daldry 2002)

I have thought about this comment for many years and about the idea of being able to express "everything that happens in a moment." I have thought about the banal moments, the moments that we think about least—a kiss, a sigh, laughter, saying hello to a friend, holding my hands beneath the water at the kitchen sink while waiting for warmth, moving to another task; and I have thought about the most profound moments, when we have been touched most, or when we have hurt most, or been happiest. I have thought about the ways that we tend to dissect these things when we attempt to remember them.

I often recall the color of an old friend's shirt, the last time that I ever saw him, before he took his own life. I am able to recall what he wore, what I wore, exactly where we were standing on the street outside the restaurant where we had dinner, but I can not remember if I hugged him or just brushed his cheek with a kiss. I cannot recall whether I was smiling or if I simply turned and walked away. That moment has become so important to me now because it was the last time that I saw his face, and yet I cannot remember everything that happened in that moment. Sometimes, though, it seems as if I can feel it, or sense parts of the moment, such as the smell of his cologne, the sounds of traffic in the city, of party-goers on the next street over, of the chill that was in the air. In my memory of everything that happened in my last moment with him, there lay several layers; the cerebral, intellectual part of the memory, the subconscious, un-namable elements of the moment, and the sensual, feeling layer of the moment.

The idea of somehow being able to tell the story of everything that happens in a moment has come to dominate my thought-processes as an artist since I first heard the phrase. As a photographer, thinking in terms of time and light and vantage point, I am a trained observer of these things. However, the still image was unable to capture these concepts in the way that I wanted to express them. Photographic images become a moment unto themselves, and the action of the moment—what came before, what came after—is lost. I began to feel a need to use a medium that allowed me to have more control over time and ultimately, over the moments that I represented in my work.

When I began to work with video as an artistic medium, I started to realize new ways of telling the story of “everything that happens in a moment” visually. I was reminded of a statement made by photographer Duane Michals in the book *Now*

Becoming Then: “Our lives have only been one moment, all at once, now.” (Michals, p.

8) I began to view the hours, minutes, and seconds that have passed not as being lost, but as elements of the present, and of my identity.

Using video, I have trained myself to think of time in the language of moving images; in minutes, seconds, and frames. There are approximately 30 frames in one second of digital video footage. I have learned to closely analyze the “clips,” or short segments of the videos that I work with, and to be acutely aware of the delicacy of their timing. The way that a clip is perceived can be completely altered, based upon the subtle shifts that occur from even between seconds and frames. In manipulating video images, I have greater control over the perception of the moment, and can cause the viewer to notice things that might have gone undetected by slowing certain elements down or speeding them up. Because of this delicate balance of timing and movement, video as a medium acts as a perfect metaphor for the moments in time and the subtle shifts that define our lives.

The number of still frames that were contained in even the shortest clips fascinated me. A thirty-second clip in which the action is so fleeting that one would have to watch it over again in order to fully comprehend the action it contained, is made up of 900 still frames. Knowing that these frames existed, moving at such a fast pace that they could go un-noticed by the viewer gave them symbolic weight for me. Working in video format connected for me the duality of the measurement of time and the experience of time.

I began to make connections between the makeup of video clips and the formal and conceptual ideas that were already inherent in my work. In working with still

images, I have always been concerned with treating the surface of the photograph or the application of the image in some way that connected with the concept of the work. The concept of time, and the effects of time, has been a common underlying element in most of my photographic work; therefore, I have often aged photographs, or damaged film before processing it, in an effort to join the concept of the image with the materials used to produce it. In considering the timing aspects of moving images, I had found a way to also connect medium and concept in my videos. Where I had simply made an effort to make images that gave the appearance of the effects of time in my photographic work, I could now manipulate time by using video images.

This led me to create a video that was comprised of a number of frames significant to my *being*. I calculated the number of days that I have been alive, from the day that I was born, until the date that my installation would be put into place for my thesis exhibition. This number is 10,417. I then developed an equation, and converted that number into “film time” and calculated that the total running time of a digital video containing 10,417 frames, at 30 frames per second, would be 5 minutes, 47 seconds, and 7 frames. This running time then became the basis for both of the videos that I made for my thesis exhibition. Symbolically, the video component of the installation, viewed as transient light, represented the intangible, fleeting moments of life and time.

My thesis installation (see Figures 1-3) symbolizes my days on earth through the video projection and through the media and materials used in creating the installation. The backdrop upon which the video was projected was not merely functional, but also had a conceptual part in the installation. 10,417 pieces of silk were attached to the substrate, making tangible the abstract concept of the length of my life. I chose silk and

mesh (the silk pieces were each glued by hand to a 10' x 27' piece of mesh material) for their delicate physical qualities. The substrate was hung using small clasps on the top that held it one inch away from the wall, so that the piece was seemingly suspended in mid-air. When the video was projected against this backdrop, the pieces became part of the projection, part of the body of light that was seen by the viewer.

Through my thesis installation, I unify the conceptual and material aspects of my work, so that the “lightness of being” and the “burden of gravity” were represented not only in the videos that I created, but also in the space itself. Metaphorically, I wanted to explore the ease with which we pass time, become engulfed and be defined by experience, and remain unaware of the force of gravity that propels us towards an end.

When I began to assemble the backdrop, I decided that the pieces of silk should be placed with no sort of pattern or order. I felt that placing the pieces randomly reinforced the idea that time is not necessarily linear, but that the time experienced by the body and the mind are a part of the *self*, so that the backdrop comes to symbolically represent both my physical existence, and my conscious being.

The video itself is made up of two components: the left side represents “The Lightness of Being,” and the other represents “The Burden of Gravity.” Although these two components were conceived and developed as separate entities, I decided to combine them as one for my thesis exhibition. I wanted the two to work in tandem, creating a sense of both accord and tension; the sounds from each mingle together, so that while the viewer focuses on the left side of the screen, the voices from the right can be heard, and when the viewer focuses back on the right side of the screen, the sound from the left side compliments the voices that speak to the viewer. My decision to juxtapose these videos

was not simply because of the audio layer of the experience. As the people in the video on the right address the viewer, the scenes on the left transition and change into each other, connoting the passage of time and the “lightness of being,” leading the viewer back to the right side of the screen, where the speakers address the inevitability of the “burden of gravity.”

In the gallery, I created a space that was a seeming vacuum, so that the viewer experiences the presentation of the video and sound in a space that evokes emptiness, except for the backdrop, the video, sound, and thousands of small feathers that were placed on the floor of the gallery. The feathers bring the concept of the work from the two-dimensional aspect of the video into the three-dimensional environment of the gallery space, evoking the words of Milan Kundera in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which I used at the beginning of my artist’s statement. “History is as light as individual human life, unbearably light, light as a feather, as dust swirling into the air, as whatever will no longer exist tomorrow.” (Kundera, p. 223)



Figure 1: Emy Mixon, Installation Detail, *The Lightness of Being & The Burden of Gravity*, 2008. Mixed Media Installation.

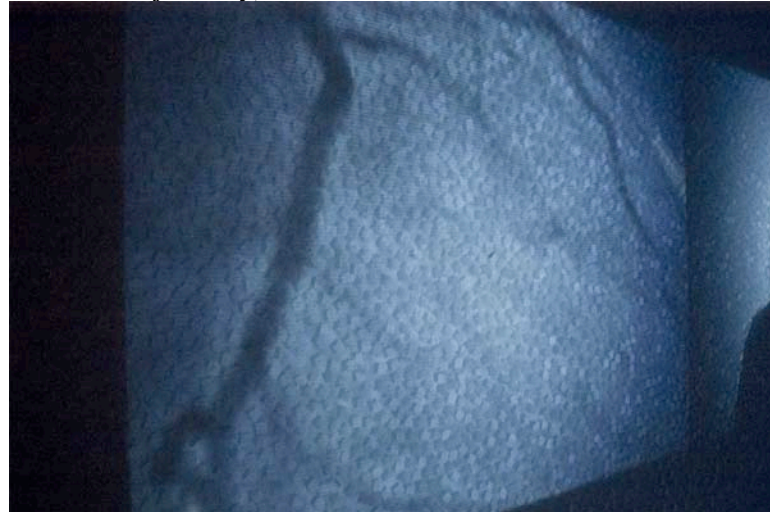


Figure 2: Emy Mixon, Installation Detail, *The Lightness of Being & The Burden of Gravity*, 2008. Mixed Media Installation.



Figure 3: Emy Mixon, Installation Detail, *The Lightness of Being & The Burden of Gravity*, 2008. Mixed Media Installation.



Figure 4: Emy Mixon, *The Lightness of Being* (still clips), 2008. Digital Video.



Figure 5: Emy Mixon, *The Lightness of Being* (still clips), 2008. Digital Video.

The Lightness of Being

The Lightness of Being is the first component of the video that I made for my thesis installation. The series of clips represent connections to the physical world, and time as a defining factor in the human concept of self.

In the early stages of making this component of my video I was more concentrated on compiling video clips than worrying about how the different things that I was shooting would work together. When I began shooting footage, I made free-association lists of things that brought to mind the ideas of lightness and burden, and what it means to feel “light” or to feel “weighed down.” Through this process, I reconnected with two childhood memories. In my first memory, I was trying to catch birds in my back yard when I was very young. I recall watching a flock of some kind of black birds landing in a huge fig tree, and being fascinated by their lightness and agility, in spite of their heavy dark coloring. I was amazed that something that looked so foreboding could simultaneously be so graceful and so weightless. As I ran toward the tree and tried to catch one of them, all of the birds alighted, and I felt both swept up in their flight, and then burdened by my own inability to fly as I watched them disappear. I remember my mother watching and laughing at my surprise that I couldn’t catch one, and then telling me that “Wild things are not meant to be held down.”

In the second memory that came to mind, I was intensely afraid of water. At a relative’s pool playing with cousins and my brother and sister, I was the smallest child in the group, and therefore the easiest target when the older kids needed someone to pick on. While roughhousing, one of the older kids pulled me under water and would not let me up to catch my breath. I choked and inhaled water, but the person who was torturing me did not realize that I was in so much distress. All of my life, I have been both

terrified by and fascinated by water. I realized through this memory that I have had a dual relationship with water. One of my greatest fears has always been that I would be trapped under water and unable to reach the surface; however, I also feel drawn to large bodies of water and the feeling of weightlessness, of being part of the “abyss.”

As I explored the two memories further, I began to see the relationship of both to lightness and burden. The color blue also became an important element. I associate the color blue with atmosphere, abyss, emptiness, and freedom. While many of my images were atmospheric and already contained blue elements, it was difficult to make the video as a whole feel unified visually. This led to my use of a monochrome filter on all of the video clips that I then colorized with the same blue tones. Although the video images are different in location, lighting, speed, and action, homogenizing their colorization unified the video. Later, when I created the second component of the final piece, *The Burden of Gravity*, I applied the same color scheme.

The sky and water came to have important symbolic significance for me in making this video. I thought of the relationships between gravity, the moon, the tides, and life cycles. We are made up of water. We are held to the Earth by gravity, and when our bodies die, they return to Earth. These relationships became important in the progression of my video.

I also used appropriated medical footage that I found on YouTube.com to make distinctions between the body, time, and identity. (All of the appropriated footage has been altered so that it is virtually unrecognizable from the version that I originally appropriated.) As I collected footage, I treated each clip as I would treat a photograph.

My approach to compiling the video images was similar to the process I might use if I were compiling a series of still images. Each clip employs the same style and aesthetic, and each clip contains a certain amount of autonomy, as well. As I worked (using MAC iMovie 6.0 HD™ software) I placed clips that had aspects in common near each other in the clips panel (a clips panel is an area in the program where imported clips are lined up and organized so that the user can select which clips to put into the timeline of the video).

Eventually, I began to make formal and conceptual comparisons between the clips, and edited them in the same way that I would edit a series of photographs, removing clips that didn't seem to work well with the others. As I put the video together, the transitions between clips began to have as much significance as the individual clips—formally and conceptually, I transitioned clips into each other so that there is an order to the progress of the video. (See Figure 5) I selected clips that reminded me of the concepts of the passage of time and of the relationship between the body, nature, the passage of time, and gravity's effect upon these things, so that the timing of the video, the amount of pieces of silk used in creating the backdrop, and the video images used all expressed my relationship to the “lightness of being.”

THE BURDEN OF GRAVITY CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

I am asking people to come into the lighting studio (down in the basement lab area in the art department) to record videos for my thesis project. The premise is, basically that you will **record a video that will be left behind, to be viewed after your death, whenever that may be...** What, at this point in your life, would be your final message...? When you record, I will set up the lighting and camera, and then I will leave you alone to record, and you can take as long as you need to say whatever you would like to say. You can approach it any way you like- you can address specific people, or not, you can address people you loved, people you didn't love, you can tell a story- a couple people have sung songs, and one person danced.

I know that it sounds a bit morbid. But ultimately, I see it as being about life- a way to leave behind something of your life, some sort of message that will go on without you, to mark the fact that you were alive. I'm interested in what words you would want to leave behind about that. As technology changes, and the ways that we view media change, human beings have an ability to transcend death that has never existed before. Until now, our treatment of death has been a ceremony of remembrance... with the vast growth of technology we now have more control than ever over how we will be remembered... I often look at pictures of my great grandmother when she was my age, and wonder what she would tell me. Now, I can leave something for descendants who may never even meet me.

This idea began last year, after a close friend committed suicide. He didn't leave much of a note. I think it said something like "Please call my brother. Forgive me." There was no goodbye. There was no final message. There was no summary, for me. Having no goodbye was one of the most painful things about the loss. And, leaving out the idea of suicide, I started to think about what I would say if I could leave something behind for the world after I am gone. I could never imagine taking my own life. But I know that I'll have to face the end at some point. I started to seriously think about what message I would want to leave to the people who knew me, to people who never met me. How would I say goodbye to the world? That is how the whole concept began.

My only parameters are that you speak in the first person, and that you don't read from a script. It is really important that you be as sincere and "real" as possible. You can wear whatever you like, although solid, darker colors work best because of the lighting set-up. Ultimately, though, your video should reflect your personality. Several of the people who have already made recordings have done it a couple times- which can help, because you become more comfortable with the camera. And if we shoot and you just don't like it, then I won't use your footage!

If you are interested, or think that you might be interested, then you can call me at [REDACTED] or reach me via email @ [REDACTED]. My schedule is pretty flexible, so we can work out a time that will be good for you to come and shoot.

Also, if you know anyone else who might be interested in participating, PLEASE have them contact me. I would like to have a good mix of age groups, etc. I will give you a DVD of your own video, as well as a copy of the final, edited video. I need to shoot the final videos between now and October 21- which doesn't leave me with a ton of time.

You can also see the first version of the video on my YouTube page, www.youtube.com/emymixon. Bear in mind, though, that this version is very tentative and that I will be doing more with the final product as far as production, sound, and aesthetics.

Thanks in advance for your help!! Emy Mixon.

Figure 6: Emy Mixon, Call for Participants, *The Burden of Gravity*, 2008.

The Burden of Gravity

In my work, I refer to the “burden of gravity” as a metaphor for mortality. It is because of the relationship between gravity and the movement of the earth around the sun that time changes, our bodies grow older, and we eventually die. Because of this, gravity, a force that we rarely consider, is the greatest burden that any of us carries.

The second component of the video, entitled “The Burden of Gravity” features clips taken from series of “self-delivered eulogies.” I asked people of varying ages and races to deliver a message that they would deliver themselves, if they were able to attend their own funerals. I decided to make this video as a more literal compliment to the first video. While the first video alludes visually and symbolically to the passage of time and mortality, it is a more meditative series of transitions, while “The Burden of Gravity” is a literal exploration of the concept of mortality, in that the participants actively discuss their lives and the ending of their lives.

I was inspired to explore this idea after a close friend took his own life. I was left with a very intense sense of longing, of needing some sort of explanation, wishing for last words from him. Although I had no desire to approach the theme of suicide, I did start to think about what I would say if I could make a video that would be seen by my loved ones after I was gone. I decided to ask other people the same question, and began to invite people to come to my studio and make their own “funeral videos.” I had no way of knowing exactly how this video would turn out when I began it. I simply gave people some very loose parameters, and allowed them as much time alone with the camera as they needed to shoot their videos. I posted a call for participants on my website (See Figure 6), and linked to that via my Facebook and Myspace accounts. As a result, I was able to attract participants of varying ages, races, and nationalities.

When I began to watch the footage of these videos, I was surprised at the many connecting themes that began to emerge. I had expected a sort of morbid overtone to dominate the words of the participants. However, the over-riding theme of all of the videos was one of hope, joy, and love. Almost every one of the participants spoke about having lived happy lives, about the people they had loved and had relationships with, and about a certain kind of peace that each of them felt in relation to their own mortality. One participant, towards the end of her video, states, “I’ve moved on to the next big adventure.”

Because of the peace and comfort expressed by the people who participated in the project, this second component of the video also addresses both lightness and burden; lightness, in that so many of the participants talked about happiness and joy and the good things about being alive, and burden, in that despite the happiness that these people express at having been alive, the videos are messages of goodbye to the world, to be viewed after they have died.

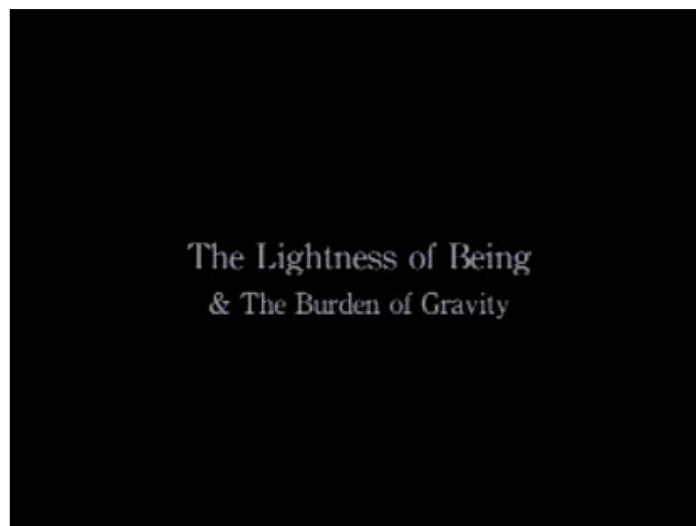


Figure 7: Emy Mixon, *The Lightness of Being & The Burden of Gravity*, 2008. Digital Video

CHAPTER 3
THE CONTINUUM: TRANSITIONS AND INFLUENCES
Transitions

My research in relation to my artwork is focused on many of the questions that are posed by existentialist thought. The novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera, was also a philosophical influence on the direction of my work. I was drawn to Kundera's work initially because of the title of this novel, which eventually influenced the title that I chose for my thesis exhibition. This phrase, "the unbearable lightness of being," caused me to consider the human experience as something tangible, as a *thing*, rather than an intangible idea.

As a photographer, I connected to this thought process. With the use of a camera, a photographer makes an impression on film of the reflection of light that bounces off of an object. With the use of light and time, both transient, the photographer then processes the image so that the light that was captured then becomes fixed, simultaneously forming a record of what was in front of the lens when the picture was made. Thus, the photographer learns to translate what is a transient or a fleeting moment in time into an object that is permanent.

As an artist, I am most strongly driven to create work that draws parallels between my own experiences and those that I might have in common with others. When I became a MFA candidate at Georgia Southern University at the end of 2005, many of the concepts that are present in my work now were already beginning to take shape. I have always been interested in the ability of photography and video as artistic media to objectify reality and translate personal experience into something more universal.

My specific interest that first year was in the photograph as an object. I made images that were only three inches by five inches. I intended for the viewer to pick them

up and engage with them intimately. I liked the idea that the photograph would eventually be physically altered after being held and touched many times. The images were no longer my personal representation of some moment or object, but became objects independent of whatever I had photographed, and were converted by time and interaction. I began to glue the very small silver gelatin images to postcards with my address as the recipient and gave them to friends. When I displayed some of the postcards in a local art exhibition, they were accompanied by a note that asked people to take a one, alter it in some way, and send it back to me. I did not divulge the meanings or symbolism that I had personally assigned to any of the images. As I began to receive responses back from this project, I was very inspired by the different ways that people had interacted with my work. Ultimately, though, I decided that I should make this project a long-term one, and focus on a different aspect of the concepts I was beginning to explore.

The passage mentioned earlier in this paper, from Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, "History is as light as individual human life, unbearably light, light as a feather, as dust swirling into the air, as whatever will no longer exist tomorrow." (Kundera, p. 223) was an influence that led to my next body of work. With this passage in mind, I made images that contained symbolism that evoked emotions of loss, isolation, and the passage of time. I made a connection between the metaphors in this passage that related to photography, and to my own work. To create a photograph is to create a sort of history. It is also to create something that is transitory, in that it will degrade and disintegrate with time; I saw metaphorical parallels, then, between the transience of the photograph, and the mortality of the human body.

Having worked for many years solely with silver-gelatin processing, I became interested in using digital imaging to make images, and as a way to explore different types of materials. I was still interested in treating the materials that I used in a way that mimicked the themes in my work, but after having worked for a long while with very small images I was also interested in making much larger pieces. I discovered specialty Japanese papers that are coated for ink jet printing. Soon, I began scanning my negatives and altering their sizes so that they were very large, and then broke them up into sections and printed the sections onto separate sheets of paper. Once the images were printed, I used sand paper to make the paper much thinner than it already was— speeding up the sort of damage and wear that would come to such delicate paper over a long period of time. The result was that the images were very thin, and very delicate, as if they could fall apart or fly away at the slightest touch—as “light as a feather, as dust swirling into the air, as whatever will no longer exist tomorrow.”

This series of photographs led to my interest in using video as a medium. I began to feel the need to create images that were not stagnant, but that depicted the transience and the duality of “being”: existence and non-existence, lightness and burden.

Artistic Influences

I have drawn inspiration for my work from not only literature and philosophy but art history as well. The works of artists Masao Yamamoto, James Turrell, and Ann Hamilton, have also been influential in my conceptual approach and processes.

Masao Yamamoto (See Figures 7-9) was one of my first influences as a graduate student. Yamamoto is a Japanese photographer who is interested in the Asian concepts of Yin and Yang, and the connection between presence and emptiness. Yamamoto makes very small silver gelatin images, ranging from the size of a thumbnail up to four by five inches. The artist concentrates on the formal elements of the objects he photographs and their relationships with other objects and with negative space. (See Figure 7) Yamamoto is also interested in the photograph as an object. After printing his silver-gelatin images, he often tones them slightly to give them an aged look, and then wears them down by tearing them or placing them in his pocket, or by folding them. The “damage” inflicted upon the tiny images brings to mind the way that old snapshots, having been neglected for many years, might begin to look, so that a sense of history is also evoked, in addition to the principles of space and form.

In his installation *Nakazora* (Jackson Fine Art, Atlanta, Georgia, 2003), Yamamoto was attentive to the placement of his photographs so that the way that they were displayed related to the conceptual themes of his work. *Nakazora* is a Japanese word that means “emptiness” or “the space between the sky or earth.” (Himes) “My photos are so small, sometimes you can’t figure out what you’re looking at... A black mountain swallowing a white sea. Or a white sea swallowing a black mountain.” (Segell, 2006)

Yamamoto's installation (See Figure 9) makes use of the gallery walls so that an interaction occurs between the images and the space between them. Yamamoto's work invites the viewer to become intimate, by forcing the viewer to come close in order to view his images, but also allows the viewer to consider the images as one body. "My installation has no beginning. You can start at any print. Where you start is where the story begins. For me, the story grows around the first print installed." (Segell, 2006)

Yamamoto describes his process in the short documentary film *The Space Between Flowers*. Time and introspection are important elements in his work, not only in how the images are perceived, but also in how he makes them. It is important to the artist to take photographs at the very instant that an idea comes to him. "If you ran out of film today and tried to come back in similar weather you might not be able to shoot. You'd be in a different mood. When you feel different, you see things differently. So I try to shoot now." (Segell, 2006)

Despite Yamamoto's attention to detail in the formal qualities of his images and in the way that he prints them, there is also an intuitive quality in his work that I identify with. In the *The Space Between Flowers*, Yamamoto also speaks of a sort of Zen meditation that takes place when he makes photographs, "I learned that an important element in Zen is 'active passiveness'... There's something similar in the way I shoot. I photograph without having clear purposes." (Segell, 2006)

When I first discovered Yamamoto's work, I attempted to emulate certain aspects of his work. I found connections between my work and his, in his attention to time, and the manipulation of light in making images, and in the way that he allows subjects to become concept, rather than seeking subjects that fit his concepts. I also discovered that,

in making very small images and in attempting to control their outcomes in the printing process, I began to enter a sort of meditative state. This drove my desire to push the idea of connecting the concept of my work to materials I used to produce it.

James Turrell is another contemporary artist who manipulates light through architecture, sculpture, and installation as a medium, addresses themes of spirituality and introspection. In 2000, Turrell designed The Live Oak Friends Meeting House, (See Figure10) a place of worship for members of the Quaker religion, in Houston, Texas. Turrell uses light in the space as a way for the worshippers who attend the meetinghouse to become meditative and to connect with God. Turrell designed a retractable roof for this space that creates the “illusion of bringing the sky right down to the ceiling’s edge, seemingly within reach, like a breathtakingly palpable and chromatic painting directly overhead.” (Herbert, pp. 71-72)

I first connected with Turrell’s work after seeing a segment about this space on the PBS series Art21: Contemporary Art in the Twenty First Century. I was drawn to the way that his work gives light, something usually perceived as transient and fleeting, a “presence,” so that it becomes something of substance to be manipulated and shaped, as a sculptor would use metal or granite. Turrell’s use of light in this manner simultaneously evokes a sense of weight and of emptiness, in that his use of light gives form and subsistence to something that usually has none, and that although the illusion of tangibility is created, one is still aware that the light can not be touched or held.

I find connections in Turrell’s work to my own in his consideration of what is internal and spiritual as it relates to what is external and tangible. I also draw connections between Turrell’s exploration of spirituality and art as a meditative

experience, and Yamamoto's interest in Zen. Both artists create work that is dependant upon the placement of their work, and the experience that the viewer has in engaging with their work.

Artist Ann Hamilton creates large-scale installations that evoke themes of transience, spirituality, and the subconscious. Her installation (*bearings*), 1996, was comprised of two large circular forms made from fourteen-foot black silk organza curtains. (See Figure 11) The forms spun counterclockwise, randomly, and clockwise at different intervals, and had openings that allowed the viewer to step inside. As viewers stand inside the space created by the curtains, they "experience an otherworldly euphoria, a feeling of weightlessness in an ethereal vacuum." (Herbert, p. 78) I connect with Hamilton's aesthetic and her desire to cause viewers to have a psychological, as well as a visual, experience with her works. The theme of weightlessness and of putting the viewer into a position that allows them to become at once involved with the artwork, and immersed in their own thoughts, sensations is also appealing to me.

Hamilton also addresses themes of erasure and of transience in her installations. In 2000, Hamilton exhibited her installation *ghost... a border act* in a textile mill in Charlotte, North Carolina. (See Figure 12) Hamilton used video images of a "pencil both drawing lines and seemingly eating or removing each line" (Herbert, ps. 81- 82) projected onto the walls of a room made with translucent silk fabric. Upon first viewing images of this installation, I was reminded of the Kundera passage quoted above, and thought about how this work connects to the metaphors that Kundera makes between history, human experience, and ephemera.



Figure 8: Masao Yamamoto, #817. Silver Gelatin Photograph.



Figure 9: Masao Yamamoto, #1141. Silver Gelatin Photograph.



Figure 10: Masao Yamamoto, *Nakazora*, 2003. Photographic Installation.



Figure 11: James Turrell, *The Live Oak Friends Meeting House*, 2000.



Figure 12: Ann Hamilton, *(bearings)*, 1996. Mixed Media Installation.



Figure 13: Ann Hamilton, *ghost... a border act*, 2000. Mixed Media Installation.

CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION

I have always had an interest in the use of photography as a method for not only recording moments in time, but also as a way to symbolically objectify time. I have explored ways of relating time and the effects of time both conceptually and physically in my photographs, and later, in my video installation.

When I first began to use photography as a visual way to express time, I thought of time as something that was in the past, and I found that I continually sought ways of connecting with the past. As I grew as an artist and began to concentrate on the objects that I was creating, and to have a sort of meditative connection to the process of making them, I began to see time differently. It was through this process of growth and through my research and experiences that I came to see time as it relates not just to my past or future, but also as a physical and spiritual component of my existence, which is retained and becomes a part of my identity.

When I began to explore the concept of being, I was led to the work of existential writers and philosophers such as Kundera and Borges, as well as Fredrick Nietzsche and John Paul Sartre. In the writings and philosophies of existential thought, I discovered a certain kind of despair—the thought that life basically means nothing, because it ends, and there will be other people to replace us, and none of us is anything more than another part of the perpetual turning of a never-ending circle. Recently, I happened upon the transcript of a commencement speech that was delivered by actor Alan Alda at his daughter's college graduation in 1980. I connected very deeply with the following excerpt:

“Maybe it was my natural optimism... but what I saw... in the existentialist writings was that life is meaningless unless you bring meaning to it; that it is up

to us to create our own existence. Unless you do something, unless you make something it's as though you aren't there..."

(<http://www.conncoll.edu/events/speeches/alda.html>, para. 28)

I connected with this statement because I had begun to see the philosophy of existence in much the same way. In quantifying the days of my life, and then examining the events that have come to define me, I have discovered all of the facets of my self and everything that fills in the emptiness that could be if I ceased to continuously "do something." Just as microscopic cells make up the building blocks of my physical self, the days and moments that have come before are the building blocks of my identity. I do not exist separate or fractured from any of these things. I am all of these things. My life is "one moment, all at once, now." (Michals, p. 8)

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