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Entangled Relationships Illustrated Through Parasitic Plants

Colleen Beyer

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ENTANGLED RELATIONSHIPS ILLUSTRATED THROUGH PARASITIC PLANTS

by

COLLEEN BEYER

(Under the Direction of Pat Walker)

ABSTRACT

This thesis paper examines the use of natural forms to metaphorically represent human bonds in my creation of the series of works for my MFA Thesis Exhibition based on interacting relationships between plants. My images focus on parasitic plants, as a metaphor for restrictive and binding aspects of human relationships. Several aspects of my work include psychological influences, my observations of the natural world, my artistic process and my major artistic influences. Chapter I focuses on the formation of my interest in psychology as it relates to entangled personal relationships and the translation of these ideas into my art. Attachment Theory and its founders Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby are investigated, followed by a discussion of parasitic plants in relation to human relationships and their significance to my art. Chapter II explores my artistic influences both conceptually and technically. Connections are made between my work and specific images that have influenced the making of my art. Creative ideas and techniques for using the paint media are discussed in relation to works of art I have researched and have learned from. Artist's works in discussion include Edvard Munch, Egon Schiele, Matthew Ritchie and Jim Dine. Also, as part of Chapter II, my personal artistic process is explained including the methods developed for both painting and drawing, and my utilization of active processes such as editing and layering. Correlations are revealed between the layering of paint and marks and the layers of hidden emotions found through the use of color, mark making, and composition which highlight how my interest in psychology combines with painting techniques to create the body of work that forms my MFA thesis exhibition.

INDEX WORDS: MFA, Thesis, College of Graduate Studies, Georgia Southern University, Human relationships, Parasitic plants, Mark making, Painting, Drawing, Oil paint, Entangled relationships, Psychology of relationships, Ainsworth, Bowlby, Attachment theory, Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art, Royal Dixon, The Human Side of Plants

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by

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B.A., University of West Georgia, 2006

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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CHAPTER I

INFLUENCES, CONCEPTS, IMPRESSIONS, AND OBSERVATIONS

In the meek garb of modest worth disguised,
The eye averted and the smile chastised,
With sly approach they spread their dangerous charms,
And round their victims wind their wiry arms.¹
-Dr. Erasmus Darwin

The two major ideas that have propelled the creation of my artwork are psychology and nature. The places where psychology and the natural world overlap combined with my personal experience all have impacted this current body of thesis work. As an undergraduate, I declared a minor in psychology and interned as an art therapist. While interning, I became deeply aware of the important effect relationships have on shaping personality and later life events. Also during this internship, I began to reflect on my own relationships and their effect on my life. Learning of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, during graduate school, and their research on early relationships and attachment theory helped me to begin developing visual descriptions in my imagery. Another important influence on my work is the writing of Royal Dixon in his book, The Human Side of Plants.² The anthropomorphic aspect of this book and his vivid descriptions of plants influenced the way I visually portray plant forms that, in combination with what I learned reading Bowlby and Ainsworth, reference how parasitic plants model attachment behaviors in humans.

As part of my first summer of graduate classes, I had the opportunity to spend a week drawing and painting on Ossabaw Island, Georgia. Observing the island's landscape directly influenced the conceptual development of my work. On that trip, while completely immersed in

nature, I found the imagery for many of the symbiotic characteristics in plant life that has formed the basis for my MFA Thesis Exhibition.

Psychological Influences

I have always been a people watcher, curious to know what makes people tick and why they act the way they do. As an undergraduate, after taking an introductory psychology class, I added it as a minor to my art degree. My two major undergraduate interests were psychology and art; which led me, with some research, to discover the field of art therapy.

During my senior year of college I interned at the Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health Program at Tanner Hospital in Carrollton, Georgia. There I realized that it was the effect of interpersonal relationships on the patients' behavior that truly interested me. Learning to see the affects of family relationships on children, how their personalities were actively shaped and molded by their family environments, had a significant impact on me. The early relationships for the children I worked with often included mistrust and doubt which ultimately affected their future adult relationships. By experiencing less than ideal relationships early in life, in which damaged family interactions are all the child has ever known in terms of close human connections, many of the children would not and could not trust the therapists. They would purposely distance themselves and create emotional barriers to keep others out. The deeply entangled roots of childhood interactions were almost a wall of haunted memories that hindered the chances of them forming trusting bonds as adults.

This idea is the premise for Attachment Theory developed by psychologist John Bowlby and later expanded by researchers such as Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby's research focus was the role of early trauma on child development. Ainsworth's main research was on early parent-child

interaction patterns and the development of anxiety. Both researchers found that early trauma and parent-child interactions shape personality and directly affect relationships throughout life.

Ainsworth's assessment technique, titled "Strange Situation" was created to investigate differences in attachments among children. During this procedure, designed to illustrate attachment behavior by interactions with mother and infant, she identified three main types of attachment: Secure, Insecure/Avoidant, and Insecure- Ambivalent/ Resistant and are described below.³

(Secure attachment is) "associated with sensitive and responsive care. Insecure resistant attached infants are associated with inconsistent primary care. Sometimes the child's needs are met and sometimes they are ignored by the mother. Insecure Avoidant infants are associated with unresponsive primary care. The child comes to believe that communication of needs has no influence on the mother."⁴

Ainsworth found that early relationships affected later human interactions. In my own observations during my internship, I found that many of the children's interactions with peers and counselors were directly influenced by inconsistent or unresponsive primary care.

Bowlby recognizes Freud as the main influence for his studies. He states that Freud "not only insisted on the obvious fact that the roots of our emotional life lie in infancy and early childhood, but also sought to explore in a systematic way the connection between the events of early years and the structure and function on later personality."⁵ Both psychologists recognized that behaviors later in life were a direct consequence of childhood events and interactions.

Relationships can be constricting and restrictive. In my work, I found a correlation between the psychological idea of how our early roots affect the growth of relationships throughout life and the characteristics of parasitic plants. A strong, stable root system promotes

healthy growth. In contrast, stressful beginnings and unstable environments generate a less healthy life. As relationships continue to grow the psychological roots grow deeper and become ingrained in personality and behavior. This is particularly true with flawed relationships.

After working with children during my internship as an art therapist, I began evaluating my own entangled relationships, especially with my father. The feelings of distrust and fears of abandonment from my childhood had, unknown to me, crept their way into other personal relationships. It was inevitable that these feelings of emotional attachment and entanglement would find their way into my artwork. Making art became for me a therapeutic process for revealing hidden layers of personal meaning and entangled paths of emotional development. As the symbiotic relationships between my research and my art grew and I attempted to understand my own thoughts and behaviors, my work was able to visually depict emotional content. Just as I had helped patients reveal emotional layers I literally began painting my own entangled feelings against the backdrop of early relationships affecting human connections (see Figure 3).

The Influence of Nature on my Imagery

“In all places, then, and in all seasons,
Flowers expand their light and soul-like wings,
Teaching us, by most persuasive reasons,
How akin they are to human things.”⁶
—Longfellow

After reading psychological case studies and observing attachments in human relationships, I began to recognize how forms in nature modeled these entanglements. Particularly in the south, where in the summer, fields of trees are overwhelmed by blankets of kudzu. Then in the winter months, these extreme entanglements are again seen in leafless vines. Relationships between plants, whether symbiotic or wholly parasitic, have characteristics that are metaphoric of human relationships. There is also a metaphoric link between plant roots and the

roots of emotional attachments. Both are unseen, below the surface, constantly growing deeper and becoming more entangled as days pass. In The Human Side of Plants, 1914, Royal Dixon expresses his love of nature and catalogs the human characteristics he finds in plants. What he discovers is not just the fantasy of anthropomorphism, but a correlation between plants possessing human qualities and performing human-like actions. Dixon believes there is a great deal of knowledge to be learned from nature, particularly plants. He says,

“What secrets we may learn from the plant nature and habits and characteristics to help us in understanding the origin, purpose, and extent of life can be found only by an intimate acquaintance with the inner life of the plants.”⁷

In one particular passage, Dixon’s description of grass speaks of several aspects one can see in my work, “some have joints from which upright stems arise, and which send down into the earth roots of their own, interlacing and binding the soil.”⁸ Through reading Dixon, my work began to evolve. Simple bends in the vines became joints mimicking elbows or knees. The vine forms began to entangle and knot themselves. Dixon believes there are many characteristics shared between humans and plants. My drawn and painted plant forms started to take on physical human components like joints reinforcing that comparison. Adding the physical human element helps to push the human emotions I am trying to convey in my imagery. For example in *Untitled IV*, the tree forms have an anthropomorphic quality with joints and limbs (see Figure 1).

A summer trip taken in 2009 to Ossabaw Island off the coast of South Georgia greatly influenced the imagery in my thesis exhibition. While there I was immersed in visual stimuli. It was one thing to research plants online only seeing them two-dimensionally on a screen. It was quite another to be surrounded by maritime forest choked by vines and entanglements. Even the beaches provided inspiration where uprooted trees populated the otherwise desolate landscape.



Figure 1. *Untitled IV*, from the Ossabaw Series, by Colleen Beyer, 2008, oil and charcoal on paper, 22"x30"

The trees where forest was reclaimed by the beach were bare and bleached giving them human-like appearances. Some had fallen over and were half buried with only their gnarled root exposed. The series of images I created after Ossabaw Island took my imagery on a new path. My tree like forms became more figurative. Joints and limbs became more apparent and defined (see Figure 1).

Within this series of work based on Georgia's coastal flora, I was able to combine my interest in psychological research on relationships with my attraction to the natural world. This became an opportunity for me to address and resolve my own feelings. My art became the vehicle for the articulation of every experience I have had, from interning as an art therapist when an undergraduate, to reading Ainsworth's and Bowlby's Attachment Theory, followed by Dixon's The Human Side of Plants; each experience provided the frame of reference I needed for the plant life I found on Ossabaw Island to cultivate the final development of my imagery. The ideas and settings discussed in this chapter when combined with the technical methods utilized from looking at the work of the renowned artists discussed in the next chapter provided the inspiration that fueled the development of the work that forms my MFA Thesis Exhibition.

CHAPTER II

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES, PROCESSES AND TECHNIQUES

During the beginning of my graduate studies, there was a clear boundary between painting and drawing for me. While I enjoyed the lines and mark-making of drawing, my drawings were strictly charcoal and my paintings were strictly comprised of paint. The mid 20th century painter Philip Guston once stated that it is “the nakedness of drawing” to which he is attracted.⁹ I too enjoy the “nakedness” of drawing, the raw marks and dark lines used to describe forms. Every painting begins with these raw marks. Some survive through the layers of paint, others are buried, and many are recreated by carving back into the paint with charcoal. In this chapter, I will discuss my major artistic influences and the technical processes I developed from looking at their work. I will also focus on specific examples of work from my MFA Thesis Exhibition to discuss the techniques I utilize both for drawing and for using paint media.

After members of my graduate faculty encouraged me to experiment, I began to blend drawing with painting. During this period of experimentation I was also introduced to encaustic painting. By building up forms in wax, I found I was able to carve into them. Each of these wax pieces had a tactile quality that I enjoyed. Unconsciously, I took the techniques I had learned in encaustic and applied them to working in oil paint. I then was able to incorporate mark-making and dark gestural lines while drawing with the color layering and more sculptural aspects of using oil paint. Through this experimentation, I became less timid. I realized that there are no boundaries restricting me to use paint in a traditional sense. I could build the painted surfaces up with a variety of tools, including spatulas, and then scrape into the layers. I could also peel layers away and even use charcoal to either dig into the paint or draw on the dried skin of the paint.

Each of my paintings begins with gestural marks in charcoal. Drawing in charcoal allows me begin the work unconsciously allowing for a flow of emotion from my subconscious to paper. Once the initial quick drawing is complete, I then begin to build layers of thick and thin paint. While creating the layers of paint, I am also drawing back into the paint with charcoal or scraping away with any tool available: the end of a paintbrush, a palette knife, or my fingers. This back and forth interaction of painting and drawing allows me to be gestural with my mark making and through this gestural experimentation I become more conscious of my paint application. The paint begins to interact with and follow the marks of the charcoal. In some areas the marks actually move or change the paint. Some marks are visible and some become unseen, buried beneath the paint, like the buried emotions of people. When the paint is scraped away and carved into, those hidden layers are once more revealed. This process of creating through layering, scraping, and revealing is as important for me as the completed piece itself, often even more important.



Figure 2. *Jaffa*, by Jim Dine, 2001, charcoal, black chalk, pastel, shellac and acrylic, 30"x54 ¼"



Figure 3. *Trapped*, by Colleen Beyer, 2010, oil and charcoal on paper, 35"x55½"

Jim Dine, an American pop artist, layers his drawings in much the same way as I do my paintings. He constantly builds up the charcoal and then erases it away. He enjoys the “building up, erasing, losing it, bringing it back, taking it away,” finding these corrections, “interesting. They are the history of each drawing.”¹⁰ This same type of history and layering are what appeal to me in my own work-- building up layers only to scrape and dig into them with charcoal. This process is evident in several of my pieces, including *Trapped* (fig. 3), in which I carve back into my layers of paint. In some works my marks are carefully created to define the form, and in other images the marks are quick and gestural. Some marks barely scratch the surface and others are more forceful digging down to the first layer of paint. Dine also combines the use of thick and thin marks. In his drawing, *Jaffa* (fig.2) he creates an eerie and mysterious landscape. Here the root-like forms grow up from the unknown. As the composition moves right, the foliage diminishes into varying levels of charcoal that is thick and dense, erased, and smudged. Some of Dine’s marks are strong and intense, some hatched to create form, and others delicately smudged. These variations of thick to thin and harsh to delicate produce visual interest throughout the entire composition and are strategies I have tried to incorporate into my painting, *Trapped*.

The concepts I found while looking at the forms within contemporary artist Matthew Ritchie’s *Universal Cell* (fig. 4) influenced the shapes I began using in root bundles and pod forms. Ritchie’s “cell” is a sculptural piece comprised of laser cut steel sheets created from his two-dimensional drawings. The drawings are made of several layers and intertwining lines. The idea of the cell appeals to me just as the body is a container for entangled emotions. Ritchie describes his piece:

“in a way each of us is in our prison. You bring it with you- the prison of your biology, your social structure, your life. And that is both a challenge and an opportunity. So I wanted to build a structure that felt like a cell-this is where you’re standing and you drag it with you wherever you go.”¹²

Ritchie's idea of the cell, as something you always carry with you, struck a chord with me. The metaphor of roots that I use in my thesis works symbolizes the emotions and the entanglement that grow as relationships mature. You carry these emotions and memories with you and they impact all of your subsequent interpersonal interactions. Ritchie's cell also represents an idea of confinement much like my use of roots represents restriction.



Figure 4. *The Universal Cell*, by Matthew Ritchie, 2004, mixed media installation, dimensions vary with installation

During my first semester of graduate school, I began a series of self-portraits. I knew the feelings I wanted to convey but was unsure of their form. As I thought about the concepts and forms found in Matthew Ritchie's *The Universal Cell*, my self-portraits evolved into bundles, giant knots of entangled roots. The bundles were a metaphor for the feelings in the pit of my stomach, a giant knot from which I could not free myself. This feeling of entrapment is also represented by the sets of hands, my own, reaching out and attempting to free themselves from this tangle of emotions.



Figure 5. *Self Portrait II*, by Colleen Beyer, 2008, charcoal and conte on paper, 18"x24"

This entire series of four self portraits was created with black and white conte crayon and charcoal (fig. 5). They began as vigorous sketching that became more refined as the forms became clearer. When beginning each of these drawings I was unsure how or where each root would interact with others. As I continued to draw, the roots became more and more entangled. Once I completed the general form, I came back with a more refined hand and began to model each root with hatching lines, shadows, and highlights. Around this time I began to find characteristics of these initial drawings creeping into my paintings unknowingly.



Figure 6. *Untitled*, by Colleen Beyer, 2010, steel and spray paint, 16"x20"x6" each

As an elective, I took sculpture and found it quite difficult to translate my two-dimensional drawings into three-dimensional forms. I again turned to Ritchie's *Universal Cell*. He created a three-dimensional form by layering and combining flat, two-dimensional cut pieces of metal. Using this idea I created four sculptural pieces out of steel, each comprised of three panels. The panels incorporate shapes of vines and foliage cut from a single sheet of steel. Each

panel was created by focusing primarily on the negative spaces, so whether viewed from the front or back, this layered viewing of the panels creates interesting shapes and forms. Previous to this I had significant trouble defining and creating negative spaces within my paintings because I thought of them as empty space. Through working with these sculptural spaces I began to see the importance of developing these spaces in my work. This attention to creating negative shapes began to transfer into my two dimensional drawings and paintings.

It was after my trip to Ossabaw that the line work of the first self portrait drawings started to show up in my paintings. Before this point, in my mind, drawing was strictly drawing and painting was strictly painting. The integration of the two media was minimal at first. In my Ossabaw series, I used the charcoal to lay out the first energetic sketch attempting to lay down the initial feeling of the piece. In the beginning of my graduate studies, while still in the state of mind that different media do not mix, I would completely cover over the initial drawing with paint. As I worked on my series of images based on Ossabaw, I would enhance my painted image by coming back into the painting with my charcoal stick. By drawing back into the wet paint, I reinvigorated the original sketch underneath. *Untitled II* (fig. 7) began solely using paint but while working on the forms I grabbed my charcoal pencil and dug into the wet paint. Working quickly with the pencil I created energy and movement in the image that had become seemingly lost amongst the more precise marks of paint.

It was during this time that early 20th century Austrian expressionist Egon Schiele began to have an impact on my work. Egon Schiele's depictions of anthropomorphic trees influenced my landscape based work to become more anthropomorphic also. The trees in his landscapes take on the same frail human characteristics seen in his portraits. The same gnarled fingers and



Figure 7. *Untitled II*, from the Ossabaw Series, by Colleen Beyer, 2008, oil and charcoal on paper, 22"x30"

joints used for his self portraits are found in his trees. He merges both psychology and nature in his paintings.

The anthropomorphic trees in his landscapes are more than visual descriptions of nature. They become self portraits of the artist, as seen in *Sunflower II* and *A Tree in Late Autumn*. A clear example of Schiele's influence can be found in images from my *Ossabaw Series* where my root and vine forms have become arms and legs with pronounced joints. In *Untitled II*, of this series, I began with an image of tree limbs. The limbs radiate from the lower left corner. As they radiate outwards, the limbs bend jaggedly and thin out as they reach the edge of the paper. The more muted tones and drips reflect the wet and dreary weather I experienced while visiting Ossabaw Island. As I began to draw limbs onto the paper, the tree began to take on human characteristics of limbs and the bends in the tree became joints. What were once plant forms took on a figurative quality in an effort to create even more of a parallel between nature and humans. Kimberly Smith, an art historian and author, also recognized this parallel within Schiele's work.

“Schiele imagines the landscape in bodily terms, creating a corpus of work that ultimately does not observe the absolute separation between portrait and landscape...Schiele references a tradition that valued the landscape genre as well as that of portraits or allegories, sometimes even eroding the distinctions between the two by conflating the body and the landscape.”¹²

Smith noted that both Schiele's figures and trees are painted in the same fashion of thin appendages and knobby joints. By painting both humans and nature with the same characteristics, Schiele extends the connection between humans and the natural world through anthropomorphism.

It was also while working on the Ossabaw series that my color palette began to change and branch out. Before that time, my colors were practically straight out of the tube. Now, I began to mix more complex colors by using all colors to extend the number of hues I had to work

with, curious to see the results. Instead of greens out of the tube, I mix a variety of greens using the blues and yellows on my palette, then adding reds, violets, and oranges to these mixtures to further extend the hues of greens I have to use. I also became interested in the different viscosities of paint from thick all the way to so thin that it runs off the paper. My content also shifted at this time. Previously I drew from my imagination. But after being immersed in nature for a week at Ossabaw, I began to use photographs. Instead of creating an exact replica of the photos, I use the photo for the initial sketch and then put it away. I no longer wanted to recreate a photo, I wanted to capture a feeling.

After the next faculty critique, the lack of foliage in my work was brought to my attention. I was so focused on the root and vine form that I had neglected the foliage and the directions that it could take my work. I could use foliage to show time, growth, and decay as well as to create new, interesting shapes and spaces. I began to research parasitic plants and their correlation to human qualities focusing on the content that they could add to my work.

As human relationships grow over time, likewise, the roots grow deeper and more entangled. These roots can become restrictive, blocking people off from other healthier relationships. Even when the relationship or plant form ends or dies, those entangled roots still remain like haunting memories. They become so engrained within the subconscious depths of the mind that attempting to understand our behavior within personal relationships becomes incredibly difficult.

Similarly, as parasitic plants slowly deprive the host plants of nutrients, human relationships can be emotionally and mentally draining, interfering with daily interactions (like eating, sleeping, etc) that inhibit a healthy life. The work I am creating for my thesis exhibit tries

to describe this reciprocal interaction. Within my artwork, I use mistletoe, dodder, and other parasitic plants as imagery to illustrate the entanglement and attachment of interpersonal relationships. In *Mistletoe* (fig. 8), the parasitic plant has attached itself to the limbs of the host tree. The mistletoe is colored bright green, as it bonds to the tree it visibly drains the color from the limbs. The limbs, in *Mistletoe*, are painted with joints and given the appearance of human appendages. In this image, I began working with imagery to depict how some plants are wholly parasitic, while others are merely symbiotic.



Figure 8. *Mistletoe*, by Colleen Beyer, 2010, oil and charcoal on paper, 34”x46”

While reading Royal Dixon's *The Human Side of Plants*, I acquired a vast array of imagery and knowledge about parasitic plants. Dixon describes plants in a poetic fashion, using his words in ways that one would reserve for speaking of humans. His poetic words add depth to his visual descriptions. As I read his words, I found myself envisioning in my mind plants writhing over one another, crawling and creeping, moving as a human might. In his chapter, *Plants that Rob and Murder*, Dixon describes the *Murdera Liana*:

It climbs by sending out clinging arms, wrapping them around the body of its victim, and joining them on the other side. Up and up climbs the strangler, always sending out new arms around the stricken tree...which is slowly dying in the choking embrace of the many tightening vampire arms.¹³

His descriptions were the scenes I wanted to create in my work. Imagining the same sense of movement and entanglement, I painted *Trapped* (fig. 3) with this description in mind. In my image, a single tree is being consumed and choked by many "clinging arms." The vine forms climb and entangle the host tree. The tree is comprised of purples and pinks. The drawn charcoal lines define the tree form. The paint is applied around the lines, letting them show, and also defining the form of the tree. Both the charcoal and paint, particularly the vibrant pinks near the bottom, create a sense of movement, an ebbing pulsation of life "slowly dying in the choking embrace."

Untitled and *Mistletoe II* also illustrate the descriptive words of Royal Dixon. In *Untitled* (fig. 9), several vine forms wrapped around a tree. The painting is zoomed in so that the edges of the tree are not visible, but the bark of the tree becomes the background. The colors are mostly cool blues and purples with areas of pinks and oranges. The joints of the vines are comprised of marks that swirl towards the center of each joint. Several areas are built up with paint that has been mixed with wax medium to create a thick texture that I could carve back into.



Figure 9. *Untitled*, by Colleen Beyer, 2010, oil on panel 30" x22"

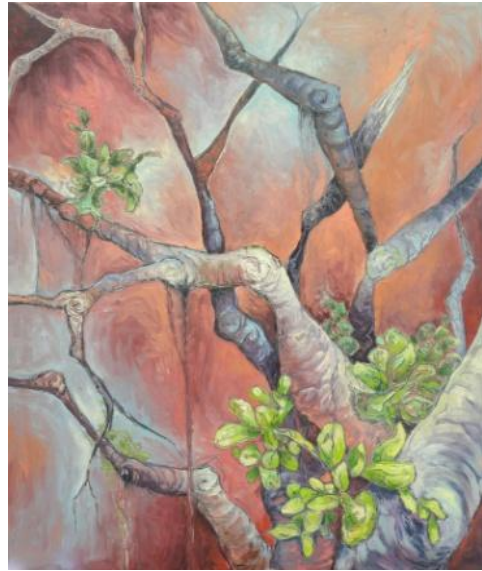


Figure 10. *Mistletoe II*, by Colleen Beyer, 2010, oil on panel 30" x22"

Mistletoe II (fig. 10) depicts several tree limbs, some with green foliage attached. The limbs branch out from the lower right corner. As they extend outward, the limbs become thinner, forking off into even smaller branches. At each bend of the limbs is a joint. The green foliage attached to the branches is representative of mistletoe, a parasitic plant. The atmosphere surrounding these forms is comprised of red tones- pinks, oranges, fuchsias. Since mistletoes carry a romantic connotation, I surrounded the positive forms with colors associated with romance. The limbs were painted in mostly blue colors complimentary of the rosy hues. The paint is mixed with a wax medium to create a thicker texture. The thicker paint also retains the mark of the brush seen in the background and knotted joints.

My first painting after my Thesis Candidacy Review was *Entangled* (fig.12). Not only was it the first painting depicting a new direction in my work, but it was also the largest image I had attempted while in the MFA program. The size alone was intimidating but I began it as I did any other of my recent images, with charcoal and rapid sketching. This painting depicts two plant

forms interacting and entangling within a parasitic relationship. The orange toned vines are that of the parasitic dodder plant, while the green foliage belongs to an unfortunate plant unaware of the relationship's perfidious outcomes. The painting is read clockwise starting with the top left corner: the beginning of this relationship where the host plant is healthy and vibrant. The orange vine is also full of life and blooming with delicate white flowers. I chose the vine, the Dodder plant, in particular because it has beautiful white flowers. Despite the initial beauty of the Dodder plant, it is a deadly parasite. As with many relationships, the early infatuation with this beautiful white flower disguises the underlying danger it poses. As the relationship continues to grow, the vine becomes denser and the true nature of the flower is revealed. In the last stage of the relationship, the bottom of the painting *Entangled*, the once vibrantly green plant is now shriveled and dull in color. The vine is now more present and overwhelming, the once beautiful flowers have now taken over the host plant completely and killing it. Their beauty becomes repulsive.

During the creation of this painting, while playing with the idea of dying plants I was reminded again of Schiele. His landscapes portray fragility and suffering of plants as they relate to human affliction. He wrote, "now I am mostly observing the physical movement of mountains, water, trees, and flowers. Everywhere one is reminded of similar movements in the human body, of similar stirrings of joy and suffering in plants."¹⁴ In



Figure 11. *Sunflower II*, by Egon Schiele.



Figure 12. *Entangled*, by Colleen Beyer, 2009, oil and charcoal on paper, 56"x 59 1/2"

Schiele's painting *Sunflower II* (fig.11), the suffering is apparent in the limp sunflower. The lone flower is tightly framed by a thin, tall canvas. It is in its final days of life-as noted by its browning, limp leaves, and blackened center. The leaves seem to barely hang on. Its tall, upright form symbolizes the human figure with emaciated limbs and gnarled joints.

While studying parasitic plants and working with the idea of one life feeding on another, I saw a work by the Norwegian expressionist, Edvard Munch; *Love and Pain* (fig. 13). His work depicts several aspects of human relationships: attraction, separation, and loss. Looking at Munch's painting, I saw a theme emerge that was not unlike my own. Many of his works create a sense of being immersed and entangled in relationships. In *Love and Pain*, women's hair becomes a symbol of attachment for Munch expressing the attachment between two people. "Strands of the woman's hair curl out and surround the man's neck, drawing him to her, a surreptitious, inevitable attachment."¹⁵ While hair was important to Munch's work, roots and vines became the prominent imagery in my paintings, surrounding the principal forms, drawing them into their inevitable attachment.



Figure 13. *Love and Pain*, Edvard Munch, 1893, oil on canvas

The idea of being controlled or consumed by the memories of past relationships and its affect on future interactions is also seen in Munch's work. Just as I saw when using art therapy to work with children, Munch's images of attachment and loss are rooted in his family relationships. I was able to see how childhood relationships had not only affected Munch later in life but how these emotions had become a basis for much of his work. It is interesting to see the correlation between his family relationships and their affect on his artwork. When Munch was five years old, he watched his mother die slowly and then his sister died only a few years later. This event at such a young age forever shaped Munch's psyche and future relationships.

In my thesis work *Trapped*, a solitary tree becomes tangled within several vine forms. *Trapped* focuses on a single tree centered within the composition that is brought to the front of the picture plane. The marks of charcoal and paint on the tree create movement and a sense of pulsating energy. Surrounding the tree are several vine forms. Some climb up the tree while others wrap themselves around it. All of them have joints and resemble human appendages. The roots and vines wrap themselves around the tree and intertwine in the way that the female hair attaches itself to the male figure in Munch's *Love and Pain*.

In the beginning, the tree in *Trapped* was merely a tree form. As I began to define the form, adding paint and color, the tree took on a feminine shape and feel. The tree is painted with variations of purples and reds, colors usually associated with femininity. The base of the tree contains mostly reds and pinks. As the viewer travels upward, the trunk becomes purple and lavender. The shape of the tree is curvy in form also referring to the female form. As this composition began to take on a life of its own, I began to think about domestic violence especially where the woman is the victim. In many cases the woman realizes she should leave but is so entangled in the relationship that she begins to feel trapped. The angst and entanglement of the

couple in Munch's work *Love and Pain* was the feeling I wanted to portray in my own work as parasitic plants attach and entangle themselves onto other host plants. I took this feeling of being trapped in a relationship into my next piece, *Surrender* (fig. 12).

Comprised of oil paint and charcoal, *Surrender* portrays a large tree being enclosed by root forms. The base of the tree is almost entirely covered by these forms. As the viewer moves up the tree trunk, there are noticeably fewer roots. Occupying the area around the tree are four smaller tree forms. The three forms on the left side are also becoming entangled as a vine wraps around each. A smaller tree form hides behind the large tree. The image was painted with mostly cool tones of blue, green, and purple with a few areas of warm oranges. The cool tones allude to a sense of calm and surrender. The tree is also leaning, no longer standing tall and strong, which also eludes to surrender and defeat. The background and leaves were painted with horizontal marks generating a movement from left to right and the idea of wind. I attempted to create a feeling of "calm before the storm" by combining the horizontal marks of the sky with the cool tones of the tree.

The tree form again in *Surrender* is antropomorphized representing a person who has given up, one who no longer fights the entanglements. The tree is no longer upright but leans to the right, falling slowly, giving in to the relentless vines that creep up and tighten around her. While creating this piece, I remembered the children in my art therapy groups who were greatly affected by the relationships of their parents as well as the research of Bowlby and Ainsworth. So I created four upright plant forms around the tree as representations of her offspring, helplessly looking on and also becoming trapped in the same entanglement. These offspring are being directly affected by their family relationships and these entanglements will shape their growth throughout life. The colors I use are toned down and comprised of mostly cool colors of blues

and purples trying to convey the feeling of surrender and the sadness of defeat. Using plant forms to depict these feelings in both *Trapped* and *Surrender*, the trees I depict are overwhelmed by the vines and roots much as the abused woman is trapped by emotions and fears.

Although my work has gone through many changes and ventured into different directions, my underlying interest in drawing and mark making has remained constant. With each influence, whether it be psychological, artistic, or from the natural world, my work is constantly evolving. I began with the idea of restrictive relationships and the entanglement of emotions within the unseen depths of the mind. These first pieces were comprised only of paint or only of charcoal. Taking a course on encaustic painting expanded my use of paint media. Through my introduction to the work of Jim Dine, I was inspired to meld media combining the thickness of paint with the raw marks of charcoal. The blending of human characteristics with nature was influenced through the readings of Royal Dixon's *The Human Side of Plants* as well as looking at Egon Schiele's psychological rendering of trees, plants, and landscapes. My interest in psychology and nature was integrated into one concept by researching the correlations between Attachment Theory and the biology of parasitic plants. As I reflect back upon creating the work for my MFA Thesis Exhibition, I remember the journey. Each influence of science, observations of nature, and the imagery of other artists led me in different conceptual directions. My many experiments with different imagery and work with the various techniques using drawing and paint media finally led to my cohering the many concepts that propelled my ideas into the final cohesive body of work presented as my MFA Thesis Exhibition.



Figure 14. *Surrender*, by Colleen Beyer, 2010, oil and charcoal on paper, 46 ¼" x 55 ½"

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

I knew that my journey towards my MFA Thesis Exhibition would incorporate my interest in psychology. During my internship as an art therapist, through my work with children, I began to see what influences our relationships, especially how early relationships affect one's ability to form close ties in the future. Reevaluating, as a graduate student, the research of Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby on childhood relationships and the life-long issues that spring from these interactions propelled the content of my MFA imagery. In the beginning of my graduate studies, I knew I wanted to portray human relationships but was unsure of the vehicle. The majority of my undergraduate works were figurative pastels. Now, as a graduate student, I wanted to steer away from the figure and incorporate other forms to express my interest in restrictive relationships. While thinking about the restrictiveness of relationships and the inability to "uproot" or remove the emotional and psychological damage of childhood interactions, I thought about times spent weeding in the garden. Roots are dirty and unseen. The longer the plant lives and grows; the roots grow deeper and become more entangled. Through research and brainstorming, roots and their entanglements became the main focus of imagery for my depiction of restrictive relationships in my MFA paintings and drawings.

After working with root imagery for almost a year, and with the encouragement from faculty to expand my imagery, I was lucky enough to have had the opportunity to take a trip to Ossabaw Island. The island filled me with new imagery and ideas. I was immersed within untouched and overgrown forests full of twisted entanglements of vines and roots. New imagery based on these forms emerged where I was able to convey my research on relationships. I found forms to use in my images even when walking on the beaches on Ossabaw Island. These beaches

were vast and otherwise barren, populated with uprooted trees whose root masses were larger than me and quite overwhelming. The rich, verdant atmosphere on the island and the feelings seen and experienced there propelled my work into a new and more interesting direction.

At this time, after being immersed within the untouched vegetation on Ossabaw and seeing all the intricate interactions between vines and plants, I came across Royal Dixon's book, *The Human Side of Plants*. His descriptions of plants and how they interact gave me a verbal and poetic portrayal of the relationships I saw on the island.

When I first arrived in the MFA program, I came with the notion that painting was strictly using paint, and a drawing strictly a drawing. My faculty at Georgia Southern University encouraged me to experiment with the paint medium and to combine different media. While taking an encaustics class, I was able to build up the media and then carve back into it with various tools, including the tip of a charcoal pencil. I took this idea and applied it to my paintings by building up the paint only to carve back into it with my charcoal. Drawing back into the paint seemed to reinvigorate the image. Each of my images begins with a vigorous sketch. In the larger images, I am able to involve the movements of my entire body to create an intense energy and sense of movement. In the beginning of my graduate study, I would have completely covered the work with paint. Now, I move back and forth between drawing and painting in order to allow my original marks to survive. When the paint covers too much of the original sketch, I return to the piece with charcoal and carve back into the paint to revive the energy underneath.

All during this process, as my work was developing, I had difficulty creating interesting negative shapes within my paintings. By taking sculpture and actually cutting out forms I was able to think of the negative shape as a physical and tangible object that required as much

attention as the positive forms. This idea also made its way back into my painting studio. My negative shapes were given much more importance and by doing so I was able to create more balanced and visually interesting images.

Aside from my research and experimentation, as work on my MFA Thesis Exhibition developed, a number of artists were directly influencing the work I made. Matthew Ritchie, an artist who works with flat panels of metal that are combined to create volume and form influenced the form of my first root bundle drawings with his work *Universal Cell*. It was in this work that I first saw how to convey the tangled relationships I was working so hard to depict. Jim Dine's combination of drawing and painting helped me to find a balance between the two media within one piece. He opened my mind to how using diverse media in one piece could energize my images. Egon Schiele's trees and their anthropomorphic nature helped me to reinforce the connection between my plant imagery and human interactions. My vine and root forms began to mimic human appendages with joints.

With every experiment I made and each idea I researched as a graduate student, my imagery evolved into a more visually interesting and conceptually strong body of work. Working with two major media, oil paint and charcoal to both draw and paint in my images, I have found a style and way of creating that incorporates all the aspects I enjoy: energetic sketching, mixing color with paint, and creating texture. My interest in psychology and nature has only gained strength throughout my MFA program. There is no doubt that I will continue on with these ideas. There are many more aspects of relationships and tangled nature I want to explore. As I begin a new and unknown chapter in my life, I am interested in exploring in new images the idea of being uprooted and transplanted into new situations while continuing to use the adaptability of plants in correlation to humans. Also, the idea of scars, healing, and regrowth are aspects that can be

shared between humans and plants. As I continue to research these ideas and develop new bodies of work I can see how the work for my MFA exhibit has given me the means to visually communicate ideas that have been important to me for a long time. My graduation from my MFA program marks the beginning of my exploration into this imagery. It is my current belief that for many years ahead I will combine my interest in psychology with my interest in nature in order to convey the many different aspects of relationships as I continue creating new imagery.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Royal Dixon, The Human Side of Plants (Frederick A. Stokes Company: New York, 1914) 60.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Mary Main, "Discourse, Prediction, and Recent Studies in Attachment: Implications for Psychoanalysis," Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 41S (1993): 209-244.
- ⁴ S.A McLeod, "Mary Ainsworth – Strange Situation." Simply Psychology, 2007. Online. Internet. Available HTTP: www.simplypsychology.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/mary-ainsworth.html
- ⁵ John Bowlby, The making and breaking of affectional bonds (Tavistock Publications: London, 1979) 1.
- ⁶ Royal Dixon, The Human Side of Plants (Frederick A. Stokes Company: New York, 1914) xix.
- ⁷ Ibid. xi.
- ⁸ Ibid. 4.
- ⁹ Schreier, Christoph and Michael Semff, Philip Guston: works on paper (Hatje Cantz: Ostfildern, Germany, 2007) 7.
- ¹⁰ Judith Brodie, Drawings of Jim Dine (National Gallery of Art: Washington, DC, 2004) 27.
- ¹¹ "Information, Cells & Evil." Art 21. Online. Internet. Available HTTP: www.pbs.org/art21/artists/ritchie/clip1.html
- ¹² Kimberly A. Smith, Between ruin and renewal: Egon Schiele's landscapes (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2004) 33.
- ¹³ Royal Dixon, The Human Side of Plants (Frederick A. Stokes Company: New York, 1914) 63.
- ¹⁴ Kimberly A. Smith, Between ruin and renewal: Egon Schiele's landscapes (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2004) 140.

¹⁵ Munch, Edvard, Howe, Jeffery W., and McMullen Museum of Art, Edvard Munch: psyche, symbol, and expression (Boston College, McMullen Museum of Art: Boston, 2001) 34.

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