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Virginia D. Millard
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Con[Text]

Virginia D. Millard

A Thesis submitted to the College of Creative Arts At West Virginia
University In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Arts In Intermedia

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Gerald Habarth
Joseph Lupo
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Morgantown, West Virginia

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Conceptual Art, Fine Art

Abstract

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My work explores the relationship of text and image to the creation and perception of our roles in the world, principally from a feminist point of view. I examine the influence of symbols and labels, both imposed and carefully chosen, on the identity women present to the world and ourselves. Through photography and design, I reflect on the roles I fill in my own life as an artist, wife, mother, and daughter and the symbols and words associated with such roles in the hope of revealing a larger truth about communication and relationships through words and images.

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I would like to thank the West Virginia University art faculty and members of my committee who never completely lost their patience with me and helped me to realize the completion of this degree despite my several attempts to derail my success. I would also like to thank my family, who did occasionally lose patience with me, but were supportive nonetheless.

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Introduction

Since I began working as an artist, I have always used my personal life and accompanying daily ephemera as a source of inspiration and content. As a former English major, I find myself continually attracted to words; words I hear, see, and imagine. Though my mode of expression moves between photography, printmaking, and digitally based processes, words and stories are ever-present.

I often suffer from debilitating reservations about my abilities as an artist, as well as in my roles of mother, wife, and woman. I find myself collecting and assembling the various negative comments and critiques I've received from others and from my own wicked inner voices. I choose to deal with these nagging thoughts and make use of them in a positive way. I try to appropriate the insecurities and doubts that unfavorable words and ideas have created and address them in a way that acknowledges that they are a reality and fixture in both the art-making process and in the life of a woman.

That fact that I deal with autobiographical content, along with the presence of my family as both muse and model for much of my artistic portfolio, leads many to conclude a feminist action in my work. I initially resisted the label of a feminist artist due to fear – of marginalization, of having to voice a concise opinion on the matters of feminism, of confrontation. However, I have come to embrace the important challenge of defining my own feminism and the undeniable presence of this feminism in my work. I approach my life as a woman with humor and self-deprecation and seek only to speak for myself and never to generalize my experiences as being representative of the lives of other women. Although I hope to reach some larger universal truths through my art, I can only attempt to offer my perspectives and stories.

My art making process moves between digital and traditionally based mediums and often combine the two. Though my first love is analog photography and the wet darkroom, my ideas are not always illustrated most effectively through the silver-gelatin image. I am constantly influenced by my training and work as a graphic designer. This background results in bold, graphic imagery combined with text. However, in keeping with the appropriation of my faults and critiques, including criticism of my technical abilities, I include the hand of the artist in much of my work. As a result of the characteristics of someone with Adult ADD, a subject I will discuss in greater detail later in this document, I do not always pay great attention to technical detail or do much planning when I begin a project. As a result, I am often blessed, and sometimes cursed, with the magic of serendipity. When my techniques result in success, I am pleased to expose the imperfect hand of the artist, including fingerprints and smudges. When such handmade “authenticity” is not as desirable, I exploit my abilities with computer software to reign in and command my sometimes-chaotic working process. I employ both digital and traditional printmaking processes, in combination with sculptural presentations. I try to utilize the most effective techniques for each individual piece and do not see myself as an artist of a particular medium. Though my work shows heavy influences of graphic design, typography, and photography, my exposure to and admiration of sculpture, painting, and traditional printmaking are equally influential in my creative process. I do not believe it is necessary to identify oneself as a painter or photographer, but rather, simply as an artist, and so I utilize whatever technique seems most appropriate to an effective expression.

I have broken up my work both chronologically and thematically for discussion in this document. Many of the pieces I will discuss here could fall into any or all of the following chapters. However, the chronological sequence of their production can be traced fairly directly to my own revelations about my art making and each piece led, in some way, directly to the next. First I will discuss the artists that have had the greatest impact on both my techniques and concepts. Then, in *Texts*, I will discuss the pieces that led to my use of text as image and were especially pivotal in my artistic development. In the next section, *Feminism*, I will discuss my views on and connection to feminism and feminist art. I will also discuss the pieces that resulted most directly from my exploration of feminist art and ideas. These are the works that have really helped to define my relationship to feminism and identify my convictions. Finally, in *Non-Fictions*, I will discuss my most recent work that represents an attempt to apply my evolved artistic style to an exploration of my life-partner and the implications of relationships on my own identity.

It is my intention that the totality of my art, concepts and statements leads to a body of work that is personally revealing, but ambiguous enough for viewers to attach their own reflections and understandings. I wish to evoke humor, even if sometimes a tragic comedy, self-deprecation, and the sense of wonder with which I approach my world and its main characters. However, I also acknowledge a darker criticism of the world we inhabit and an underlying tension within my work. I truly believe that we are all in this together, and I hope that by revealing a bit of my perspective, and myself, I can be an active participant in our complex society. I hope, if nothing else, I can give pause to viewers and evoke both a visually and cognitively stimulating experience.

Artistic Influences

John Baldessari (1931-)

"I'm really interested in what conceptual leaps people can make from one bit of information to another and how they can fill the space." - John Baldessari

Baldessari's early major works were canvas paintings that were empty but for painted statements derived from contemporary art theory. An early attempt of Baldessari's included the hand-painted phrase "Suppose it is true after all? WHAT THEN?" on a heavily worked painted surface. Baldessari decided the solution was to remove his own hand from the construction of the image and to employ a commercial, lifeless style so that the text would impact the viewer without distractions. The words were then physically lettered by sign painters in an unornamented black font. The seemingly legitimate art concerns were intended by Baldessari to become hollow and ridiculous when presented in such a purely self-referential manner.¹

John Baldessari's "I Will Not Make Anymore Boring Art" (figure 1) is an apparent starting point for my research and inspiration dealing with my own insecurities as an artist. Baldessari's text-based works, specifically, the prints and paintings featuring descriptions of art, art processes and art ideologies, has profoundly impacted

¹ Gillick, Liam. *Again the Metaphor Problem and Other Engaged Critical Discourses about Art: A Conversation between John Baldessari, Liam Gillick and Lawrence Weiner*. Springer, 2008. p. 36

me. His use of text as image allowed me to reconsider my own expectations of what constitutes “art”. Also, his developments in the use of appropriated text and images have impacted my own use of appropriation. Viewing his work and the chronology of his work, he didn’t redefine his style until he was 40 years old, has given me a kind of road map to follow and emulate. Aside from his art, I have also been influenced by his life-long commitment to teaching and his views expressed through countless writings and interviews on the art-world. He has helped me realize the humorous and realistic sense of what it means to survive as an artist.

Ed Ruscha (1937 –)

“When I began painting, all my paintings were of words which were guttural utterances like Smash, Boss, Eat. Those words were like flowers in a vase.” - Edward Ruscha

During the early 1960’s, Ed Ruscha became well known for printmaking, collages, and paintings. Influenced by pop art, he later achieved recognition for his paintings incorporating words and phrases. (Figure 2) Also a photographer, he published photographic books including *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* and *Every Building*.²

Ed Ruscha’s word paintings have led me to consider the examination of words outside their original context. Like Baldessari, Ruscha explores appropriation and takes words out of their original context and re-presents them in ways that affect and alter their meanings. I have also been a student of his navigation between mediums. I consider his switch between painting, printmaking and photography as a conscious choice of medium linked to concept and content. The juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated text and image

² Ed Ruscha, James Ellroy, Ralph Rugoff, Alexandra Schwartz. *Ed Ruscha: fifty years of painting*. Distributed Art Publishers (2010) p. 26

adds another layer of alteration to his appropriated words and creates both humor and ambiguity. I also have been impacted by his exploration of font and typography as an extension of his alteration of text.

Jenny Holzer (1950 –)

"Fear is the greatest incapacitator." - Jenny Holzer

Jenny Holzer, originally trained in the art of painting and printmaking from Ohio University in 1972, is most recently known for her large-scale text pieces. These text pieces are formally called "Truisms," which are typically common myths or phrases on certain subjects in the form of slogans. Her large-scale text works take the form of many mediums, but are primarily known as large projections. (Figure 3) The use of these large-scale, simple and clear texts adds impact to her often-cryptic phrases.³

There is a distinctly feminist undertone to Jenny Holzer's work. She appropriates the most common forms of marketing and the authoritative male voice of published text to confront violence and ignorance with simple elegance and ironic humor. The text used in her most recent projections on architecture and landscape, though often enigmatic, typically relate to the location of each project. I am most greatly impacted by the combination of text that is resonant of advertising and the use of commercial modes of expression. Holzer's work has compelled me to explore the use of more commercial mediums, such as vinyl and silkscreen.

³ Holzer, Jenny. Jenny Holzer: Laments. Dia Art Foundation, 1989. p. 14

Lorna Simpson (1960 -)

“When I take a picture, I have an idea in my head, and I try to make it work. Then I play with language to get what I want.” -Lorna Simpson

Lorna Simpson, an artist and photographer from New York City tackles the vexed topics of racism and sexism with the grace and simplicity of minimalism, relying on text to inflict her images with a biting critique on the authoritative voices of contemporary society. Though her work often employs the standards of documentary photography, working in black and white and posing her subjects in front of stark backgrounds, her use of text, juxtaposition of images, and precise selection of what is both present and absent in her work make each work undeniably editorial. (Figure 4) Simpson has become a pioneer for many generations of artists to come, as she was the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition in the “Projects” series at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1990) and to represent the United States at the renowned Venice Biennale (1993).⁴

Text is an integral part of Lorna Simpson’s work, both as part of the image and in the titles of her work. Like John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha, combining images with text allows Simpson to construct a formula in which she can further her exploration of identity and narrative. Simpson’s text is often fragmented and vague, implying an open-ended narrative to the imagery and allowing the viewer to interpret the work. As a result, the viewer must contend with his or her own stereotypes and assumptions that direct their interpretation of the image/text combination. Simpson has had the greatest influence on

⁴ American Federation of Arts. Lorna Simpson: A Resource for Educators. 2006 p. 5

the work I have made most recently and plan to continue making. She flawlessly combines photographic technique with text to create work that confronts larger societal and political issues while maintaining provocative, yet poetic and mysterious narrative.

Texts

I began my serious educational explorations as an English student before coming to the practice of visual art. Though I could not find room enough for creativity and personal expression within the study of literature, I have maintained a lifelong love affair with words and stories. I am constantly pleased to find words and combinations of words in varying contexts that are new and surprising. However, despite my knowledge of conceptual art that relied so purely on text and the long history of text-based art, it was quite a revelation for me to allow text into my art. Early in my education as an artist, a professor told me that if an idea could not be expressed purely with image, the image simply wasn't strong enough. Although I rationally knew that to be a baseless statement, it stuck with me until I gained the confidence to rebel, albeit unbeknownst to the professor. That rebellion was a pivotal and liberating revelation for my work and text has since become a constant fixture in my process.

The first pivotal work to rely primarily on text was *Keepsakes*. It is language and words, more than actions and consequences that make up the source of my anxieties and insecurities, both in life and as an artist. *Keepsakes* (Figures 5 and 6) is a piece that attempts to address and appropriate the fears and doubts that have been conceived through the criticisms of others. I have found that throughout the inevitable critiques that accompany art making, there have been a handful of comments that seemed especially dominant and memorable in my continuous loop of self-examination. Comments like "I've seen this a million times" and questions like, "What don't you want the viewer to get?" represented both blocks to my creative process and opportunities for creative solutions. These textual hallmarks became my psychological welcome signs every time I

entered the studio to work or began imaging a new project. Some comments like, “This is nice for the family photo album, but it’s not art” also seemed to represent a flagrant sexism that I doubt would be applied to a male peer without children or a spouse. This double standard also points to the underlying hesitation on my part to align my work too closely with a feminist cause. I decided to deal with these comments directly, using the quotes of my critics as the primary imagery for the piece.

I collected the six comments that had made the greatest contributions to my threatened self-image and silk-screened them onto individually painted panels. I chose to use *Helvetica* as the font, both for its clarity and commercial familiarity as well as its masculinity, referencing the authoritative male voice of the printed word. The panels are hung in a grid by grosgrain ribbon that would typically be used to hang the kitschy welcome signs found in the homes of retirees with disposable assets and Kirkland’s shoppers. Though the text is black, the color palette of the substrates consists of cheerful candy-colors that lend humor to the piece. The grid, an important element in arranging the piece, reduces each comment to an equal piece of a larger whole. Also, the grid is a formation, often referred to as masculine, that I have used repeatedly and been criticized for; a self-referential nod to my past failures. The appropriation of these comments and treatment of them with humor and self-deprecation reversed their negative connotations and have allowed me to embrace what previously represented confirmation of my momentary self-doubts.

Following the success I felt I’d reached with *Keepsakes*, I began work on another text-based piece. The piece, *Something From Nothing: proposals, plans, and sketches for things I never made* (Figure 7), follows thematically from *Keepsakes*. Again, I

wanted to deal with the issue of self-doubt as related to my artistic insecurities and, specifically to this piece, the observation that I frequently develop ideas that I do not fully execute. In keeping with the desire to accept and appropriate my character defects, I decided to finally use all of my incomplete projects to create a resolved work. In this piece, all of the proposals, sketches and statements for projects I've never finished or in some cases never started, are silk-screened on top of one another on a painted canvas. The build-up of layers creates an abstract image composed mostly of text, but never allows the viewer to fully decipher the text. The layering of text and image reveals the excessive number of unresolved projects and references the abstracted and convoluted nature of my previously undecipherable conceptual foundation. The use of the canvas as a substrate for the printing also references the idea of "elevated art" and the overwhelming popular desire for object-based art; an artistic preference that does not place the value of ideas over the production of a finished piece of work.

Something From Nothing: proposals, plans, and sketches for things I never made also alludes to the Adult ADD diagnosis I received while a graduate student. As my responsibilities mounted throughout graduate school, I found myself having increasing difficulty balancing my various obligations, assignments and chores. A comment during a critique of my art that I seemed to have "artistic ADD" along with the realization that my disorganization, distractedness and inability to focus on and complete tasks was becoming more debilitating in my personal life and academic career prompted me to seek medical attention. I went to a psychiatrist hoping for a fabulous new psychotropic remedy, but after an extensive battery of tests, I was diagnosed as having extreme Adult ADD. This realization was a relief in many ways, but is also discouraging at times when

I lack the ability to control the symptoms I am exhibiting at any particular moment.

Although I was only diagnosed as an adult, I can look back at the course of my life and identify many instances and challenges that can be illuminated by the diagnoses. A primary example of my symptoms is my constant inception of plans for art works that never reach fruition. Since being diagnosed, I have tried a number of therapies, both pharmaceutical and behavioral, and have yet to find one that works consistently. As I waver between productive clarity and debilitating disorganization, I have found myself increasingly frustrated by my abilities, or rather, my inabilities. *Something From Nothing: proposals, plans, and sketches for things I never made* allows me to treat with humor the constant condition of my confused synapses while offering documentation of what many consider an over-diagnosed disorder that simply excuses laziness. My ADD is something that I am just beginning to come to terms with and is a theme that I hope to deal with much more extensively in future work.

Another series of works collectively known as the *Facebook Haikus* (Figure 8) use text to deal with a very different topic. For this collection of digital prints, I took a day's worth of my "friends" Facebook status updates and used them to create 24 haikus. I use the term "friends" loosely as many of my Facebook friends are people I have not seen in over a decade, but whom I like to stalk and I assume like to stalk me. The haiku is an ancient form of Japanese poetry made up of three lines, the first and last having five syllables and the middle having seven syllables. The haiku is a short poem that captures

and describes the essence of a moment of time or an environment.⁵ Perhaps because of my background in English, I have always seen a similarity between the ancient art of Haiku and the contemporary Facebook status update and Twitter messages. Facebook status updates are generally brief and often comment on one's immediate state. When most of us update our Facebook status, we comment on what we are doing at the moment, what we have been doing, or what we are about to do. Sometimes we simply express whatever is on our mind. In-program applications automatically report what we are doing in a specific application in real time. In this way, our status updates act as snapshot recordings of our immediate reality, much in the way the haiku is intended to do: capture an essence.

Although the words of each Facebook haiku are not my own, I collaged and appropriated my Facebook friends status updates to create original haikus. In this sense, the words that initially behaved as recordings of their immediate realities are recycled to become records of my own impulsive impressions. Within the collection of haikus I find both silly and humorous poems, like *Little Wayne* (Figure 9), and others, such as *Bad Mother* (Figure 10) that relate more intimately to my own experiences. The collection of appropriated "ready-made" poems creates a meditation on the precepts of authorship and ownership in public Internet expression, as well as on contemporary forms of communication in relation to the ancient forms. I present the haikus in a visually minimalist template resonant of the Facebook layout. The series samples the influence

⁵ Higginson, William J., Reichhold, Jane, and Harter, Penny. *The Haiku Handbook -25th Anniversary Edition: How to Write, Teach and Appreciate Haiku*. Kodansha International, 2010. p. 49

my background in graphic design. Again, I have appropriated the masculine grid for the installation of the haikus. The presentation of the poems in grid formation accentuates the equality of each poem the way each post on Facebook has equality. Internet based social networking is one of the truest contemporary forms of democracy and the grid is equally democratic in representation of each individual piece as a part of the larger whole. By looking at the words of my “friends” and recombining them to fit my own interpretations, I am able to examine how my affiliations with various people from my past and present reflect my own identity.

Text will maintain a prominent role in my artistic process. Once I allowed myself to incorporate text into my work, I immediately found work that expressed my concepts more directly and successfully. I also view words and texts as content and concept in themselves. The plural meanings of words in various contexts and their implications have lasting effects on our perceptions and impressions. In a time when we are all bombarded daily with hundreds of images in various media, printed words seem to have developed the power of novelty. In a fascinating reversal of roles, the once revolutionary reproduction of images has, in many ways, deemed itself impotent while the timeless written word has gained power through its increasing rarity.

Feminism

I have come to understand and define my own feminism as an individualized and complex personal decree to be able to do and be anything I choose, or nothing at all, free of expectations based on my gender. Though I celebrate my individual attributes and abilities that only I, as a woman, can have, I reject the assumptions and implications of gender identity. I view my life as a woman as an existence filled with pluralities. I fill roles unique to my gender: as daughter, mother, wife. However, I seek neutral treatment in the gender ambiguous roles I fill: as student, artist, professional, and human. The cognitive dissonance between wanting to embrace and celebrate my identity as a woman and rejecting the imposition of gender bias has been at the core of my investigation of feminist art and art making. I have found that it is often we, who call ourselves feminists, who inflict the strictest requirements upon other women and, by extension, women artists. Though in the past it was important to present a united front to the world while fighting for the causes of women, I believe contemporary feminists should encourage dissent, discussion and individualism within the feminist community. One should feel as welcome in taking advantage of all of the rights our foremothers fought for as in declining the fruits of those rights. My contemporary feminism is one of choices and I try to equally respect the choices of the women around me, not compete with or condemn them.

For me, feminism is life affirming and open-minded. It is the lens through which I have come to perceive my artistic practice and my personal and political circumstance. I have seen how vital the feminist movement is to the world at large and have come to understand how my own life and art may be relevant in this wider context.

A concerted effort has brought us this far and I am grateful to the many inexhaustible feminists for their art, their scholarship, their leadership and their support.

I was only able to form my personally committed views on feminism after exploring my attractions to and reservations about feminist art through my own art making. Having tackled my artistic hurdles and the shortcomings in my process with previously discussed text-based works; I decided to address a related concern, the generic quality of my work and my desire to make personal and sincere work while overcoming my fear of vulnerability. *Swallow Your Pride (Confessions)* (Figure 11) derives inspiration from text-based women artists, such as Barbara Krueger and Jenny Holzer. In this piece, I wanted to experiment with the graphic possibilities of text and the combination of text and image. The basis of *Swallow Your Pride (Confessions)* is the exhibition of personal topics that I find too revealing and confessions of guilt and embarrassment that contribute to my self-doubts and insecurities. In short, the piece addresses all of the elements that I could include in my work to make it more personal, but that I find terrifyingly revealing. They are presented in such a way that some words and phrases are made undecipherable by their positioning and layering upon each other.

Formally, the piece explores positive and negative space and the use of text to form an image. However, the foundation of the piece is a meditation on the feminist motto “the personal is political” and the idea of “coming to voice” championed by the women’s movement from the 1960s to the present. In this sense, it is my coming-out piece, although decidedly a cautious coming-out. Though some of the confessions in the piece are intended as humorous, they also show a device of using humor to mask fear and vulnerability – both in art, and in life. The image has been printed on transparent vinyl

and placed on painted canvas. Again, the canvas is a reference to the most commonly accepted art objects and the idea of what constitutes a “finished” art piece. Because the image was created digitally, it could exist in its physical manifestation as large a work (making it easier to read) or as small (rendering the public confessions mute) as I deem appropriate, changing the content of the piece simply through its size. The use of vinyl also represents a nod to the traditionally commercial mediums used by artists like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Krueger, who have appropriated mediums generally associated with historically male dominated industries.

Following my personal revelations about using text as both content and image, I returned to some previously unsuccessful work that I felt could be further developed with the addition of text. I had done a series of photograms of my most decorative and feminine underwear that, although they made lovely images, produced conflicting critiques that led me to conclude that they were not expressing a concise concept. At the time, I could not fully articulate the concept I wanted to express with the images of my panties and so I set them aside and continued to ponder what they meant to me. During some of those early challenging critiques questions came up about the importance of the viewer knowing that panties belonged to me, and about the choice to use only my most feminine thong panties. I began reflecting on these questions while continuing to consider the ideas of ownership, authorship, and the authoritative voice of the printed word that arose from my first text-based works.

To resolve the alleged ambiguous nature of the previous images and my underlying investigations into words, I decided to explore the nature of pronouns while experimenting with the combination of photographic imagery and text. The resulting

series of works, called *Panties and Pronouns* (Figures 12 and 13) confront the ideas of ownership and the changing tone of pronouns from possessive to accusatory to descriptive when placed in unexpected contexts. The images of the panties alone are reminiscent of x-rays of the female reproductive system. The stark quality of the photogram removes the represented form of the undergarment from its expected context, reducing it to shape, tone and form, giving objects that are usually ornate and decorative a haunting and sinister presence. The addition of possessive pronouns, such as “mine” and “his”, evoke questions of ownership. The viewer must question for whom such panties are intended and confront their own associations with the images and words.

For the addition of text to these images, I again chose to use *Helvetica* as my font. This time, I chose the large simple block lettering not as much for its clarity and familiarity, but for its masculinity. By enlarging the text to fill the entirety of the image, the panties and words are given an equal presence in terms of their size. The bold and impersonal nature of the text contrasts the delicate transparency of the personal items pictured. The powerful appearance of the text again raises questions about the authoritative (male) voice of the printed word. The combination of the images of the panties and the various possessive pronouns raise questions of the implied sexual associations of the panties and the entitlements of those that wear them versus those that wish to consume or react to the wearer. The juxtaposition of the images and words force an attempt to reconcile the discrepancy between the personal freedom to consume and display provocative attire and the desire to maintain control and ownership of ones body.

I can no more divorce myself from feminism than I can deny my right-handedness in art making. A persisting feminism is a presence in my work whether noticed for its

absence or its glaring confrontation of feminist issues. Though I owe much to the boisterous feminist art of the early feminist movements, mine is a more subtly hostile, sometimes witty, feminist art presence. I view the feminist undertones of my works as a passive aggressive force that rears itself whether I consciously embrace it or not. My own confusions over contemporary feminism come through as an underlying tension in much of my work and reflect the conflicting views and depictions of women and feminism in our contemporary societal climate. I could not call my views and relationship to feminist art making fully resolved, but my acceptance of that presence in my work is fully accepted. I know that as my experience grows, both as a woman and as an artist, new issues will arise and old personal declarations will seem naïve. However, I will continue to explore and construct my understanding of what it is to be a woman and a woman artist.

[non]Fictions

Having tackled many of my own internal psychological issues from an intimate perspective, I have begun looking to explore those with whom I share my life for insights to my relationship with the outside world. Since my very first clumsy attempts at art making, my husband, David, has served as my patient model. Though I am likely biased, I have always found his form and persona an endlessly fascinating subject for my photography. However, having abandoned pure image as a mode for my artistic expression, I began exploring him as subject through text and symbolic representations. Also, because of my desire to resolve my feelings about feminism, it has become clear to me that I can not define myself as a woman without acknowledging and illuminating my relationships with men. Though feminism is rooted in the need to assert our abilities and ourselves independent from the expectations of men, feminism would be moot without the need to coexist with men. Therefore, my desire to explore David's identity is just as much, if not more, for the purpose of defining my own identity as a woman and feminist. The work I will discuss here is not resolved and exhibition ready, but represents an important progression in my artistic style that reaches beyond my internal personal confusions to begin a discourse on intrapersonal relationships as they reflect my own identity.

David, who is 40 years my senior (a rich topic in and of itself), recently reached the age at which he could begin collecting Social Security. As he began to compile the documentation necessary to file, I was struck by the impersonality of the documents that provide a record of our lives; birth and death certificates, marriage and divorce certificates, tax returns, and various legal forms and letters. Like the panty images from

Panties and Pronouns, I had previously begun and abandoned a series of simple, graphic, large-scale images of David's ties that, although lovely images, lacked substance. I decided again to return to this work and attempt to infuse new meaning and personalization to the imagery with the addition of manipulated imagery and text. I began to consider the combination of the impersonal forms required by Social Security with the forms of his neckties. Though chosen carefully by color and pattern or given as gifts, neckties reveal little about the wearer beyond the stereotypical signals of status and taste. Similarly, when the milestones of our lives are reduced to institutional forms, very little is revealed about the nature of our identities and the lives we have formed. However, when looked at collectively and combined with editorial narrative, a full and revealing picture may emerge.

For the series *David's Ties* (Figure 14), I began with four sculptural ties, each featuring specific themes. Each tie has been enlarged to David's height, 6'4", and protrudes three-dimensionally from the wall, as a surrogate for the human form. *David's Tie 1: Proof of Sanity* features the deconstructed text from a legal document releasing him from involuntary committal to a psychiatric hospital. My husband attempted suicide early in our relationship and this event has shaped much of our marriage. We each look back at the event with humor and this letter has become an icon for his psychosis. Though we are not shy about talking about this period of our lives, it is an element of David's history that few people know about. The idea that he could wear the letter on a necktie for all to see is both appealing and humorous; he is very proud to have a legal document that certifies him as "Not Mentally Ill".

I have also attempted to use imagery in combination with directive editorial titles to develop a portrait of my husband. In *David's Tie 4: Ideal Dinner Party* (Figure 15), I have used photos of all of the people David would invite to his ideal dinner party to reference a pattern that could be found on a necktie. This is a hypothetical discussion we have often, usually after an extended happy hour. David is constantly compiling the guest list of celebrities, politicians and public figures he will host for his perfect dinner party. I have always interpreted this exercise as a committed atheist's view of the afterlife. Though the list changes and grows, there are several permanent invitees that are featured on the tie. I find the fact that he would invite both Anne Margaret and Noam Chomsky revealing.

Though an interesting and educational first attempt, I deem these executions of the ties unsuccessful. I include them here not only as an important representation of the broadening of my content, but also as an example of the constant process of trial and error that makes up my working style. My commitment to the use of text in my work, particularly two-dimensional representations of text, has been strengthened by the experimentation with these sculptural ties. Again I have seen that I am most successful when abandoning the pure image in favor of text as image. For example, as I look to remake *David's Tie 4: Ideal Dinner Party*, it is clear to me that rather than using images of David's desired dinner guests, simply using their names would likely be more engrossing and visually stimulating. The graphic representations of the guest's images upon brightly colored, stylized, three-dimensionally rendered ties take the work into the realm of pop art that seems inappropriate for the content. Furthermore, I see this work as an opportunity to explore the use of hand-written text. Just as the bold, clean formality of

the *Helvetica* font represents a masculine formality, I think the use of hand-written text to re-write the text found on institutional forms would lend a sense of femininity to the work. Adding a feminine presence to the ties would begin to imply my sense of ownership and protectiveness over David's stories and life. This juxtaposition would further the examination of how my relationship with my husband defines my personal identity and credence's. I will continue to excavate the symbols and subjects surrounding my husband and the neckties and further explore the power of text to compose an image and relate content.

Aside from the practical and technical concerns over the production of the *David's Ties* series, the work is indicative of my desire to expand the narrative within my work. Again, as a former English major who loves the stories of literature, I seek to exploit the power of the non-fiction narratives in my world. Though I have begun most thoroughly with my own autobiographical narrative, I am appropriating the found stories of life and incorporating them as an extension of my own developing story.

The Future

As I look ahead, I see no immutable path for my artistic and professional future. Though my adult life can still be called brief, it has been an exceptionally eventful introduction to adulthood, and I have learned that plans have very little to do with the future. I am confident that at my retirement party many years from now, I will still be trying to figure out what I want to be when I grow up. However, I can say with certainty that whatever my future career path, I will always be a practicing artist. My time as a graduate student has been filled with challenges, but has given me a greater maturity and clarity in my committed approach to art making. I have discovered my sense of self as an artist and am looking forward to building upon that newfound artistic identity.

I know that text will remain a constant in my artistic process. I am currently at a stage where text is the dominant element in my most successful artistic executions and I feel that I have a lot more territory to explore in this vein. However, from studying the artistic progressions of the text-based artists that have been so influential for me, I know that it is impossible to say that this will be the ultimate resolution for my process. As exhibited in the portfolios of artists like John Baldessari and Lorna Simpson, whose most current imagery is absent of text, I acknowledge that I, too, may reach a point of returning to pure imagery if I am persistent enough to enjoy a career that stretches over decades rather than semesters. It is also for such artists and for the artistic discoveries I have made during my academic pursuits, that I know it is persistence, patience, and commitment above all else that will lead me to progress.

Though I am confident that my perspectives and processes may change expectedly and unexpectedly in my future as an artist, I have discovered what is most essential to my artistic identity. I will forever value my responsibilities and privileges as a feminist, I will continue my love affair with words, and I will always be engrossed with the personal narrative. Though my medium and perspectives may be altered, those essential revelations will remain. As I spend less time in an academic environment, I realize that I will have to adapt my process to the practical concerns of space and resources. I also am realizing more fully the importance of establishing a connection to an artistic community from whom I can rely on for the discourse and support necessary for the continuation of my career as an artist. I have embraced and exploited my fears and self-doubts and, though it is a continuous struggle, accept them as inevitable accompaniments to an artist's career.

Knowing all of this, I am excited to begin further explorations of the terrain I have begun to cover. I plan to push the use of my graphic design experience in the production of my art while finding a way to maintain the poetic "hand of the artist". I will continue to explore my relationships, their textual connotations, and the insight these may provide into my own identity. I want to examine more fully the manifestations, both visually and textually, of living with ADD. I will also continue to examine pluralities; the pluralities of womanhood, of words, and of images. Though I may not be able to offer a clear vision of my future professional life, I know that I have developed the cause and commitment of a lifelong artist. I will continue my pursuits as an artist not because I live for art, but because I need to make art in order to live.

List of Figures

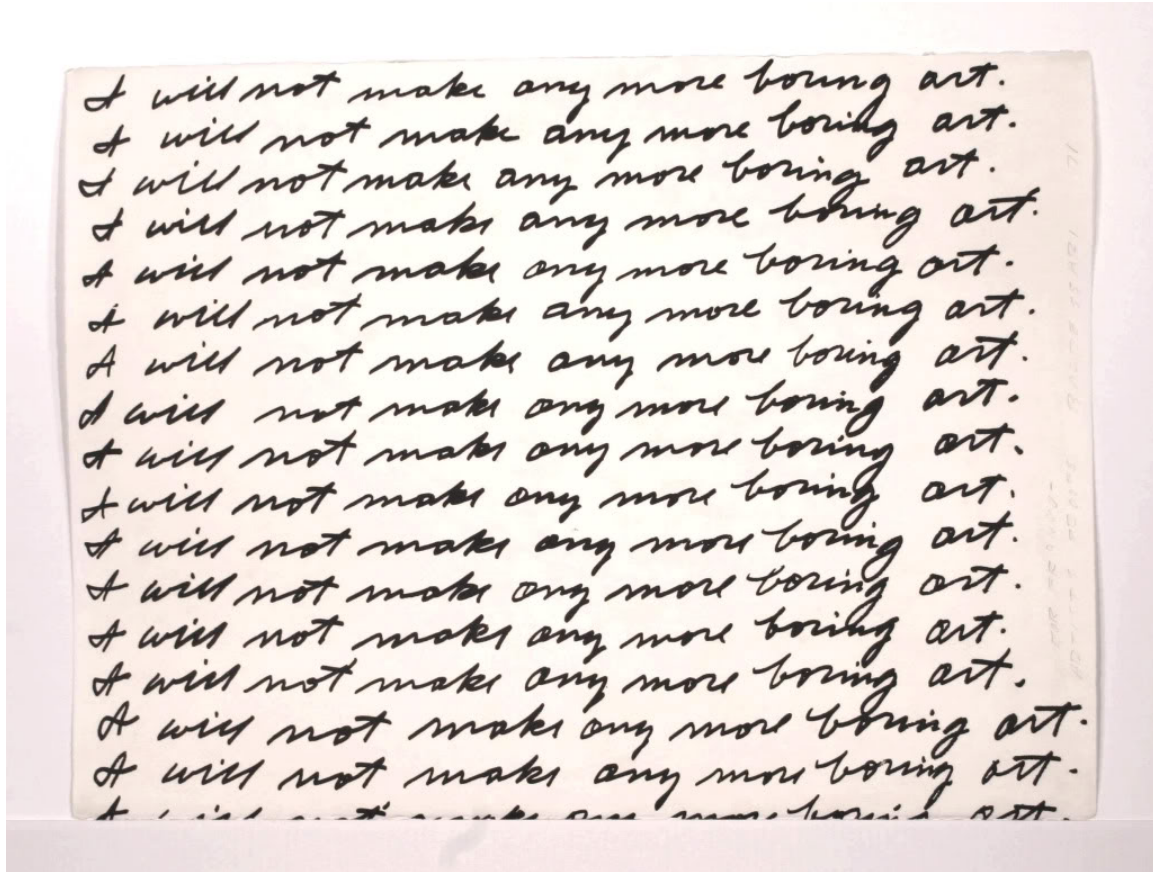


Figure 1

John Baldessari
I will not make any more boring art, 1971
Lithograph



Figure 2

Ed Ruscha

Pay Nothing Until April, 2003

Acrylic on canvas support:
1527 x 1525 x 40 mm painting



Figure 3

Jenny Holzer

“I need to lie back to front with someone who adores me.”
Xenon on Berlin’s matthäikirche, 2001

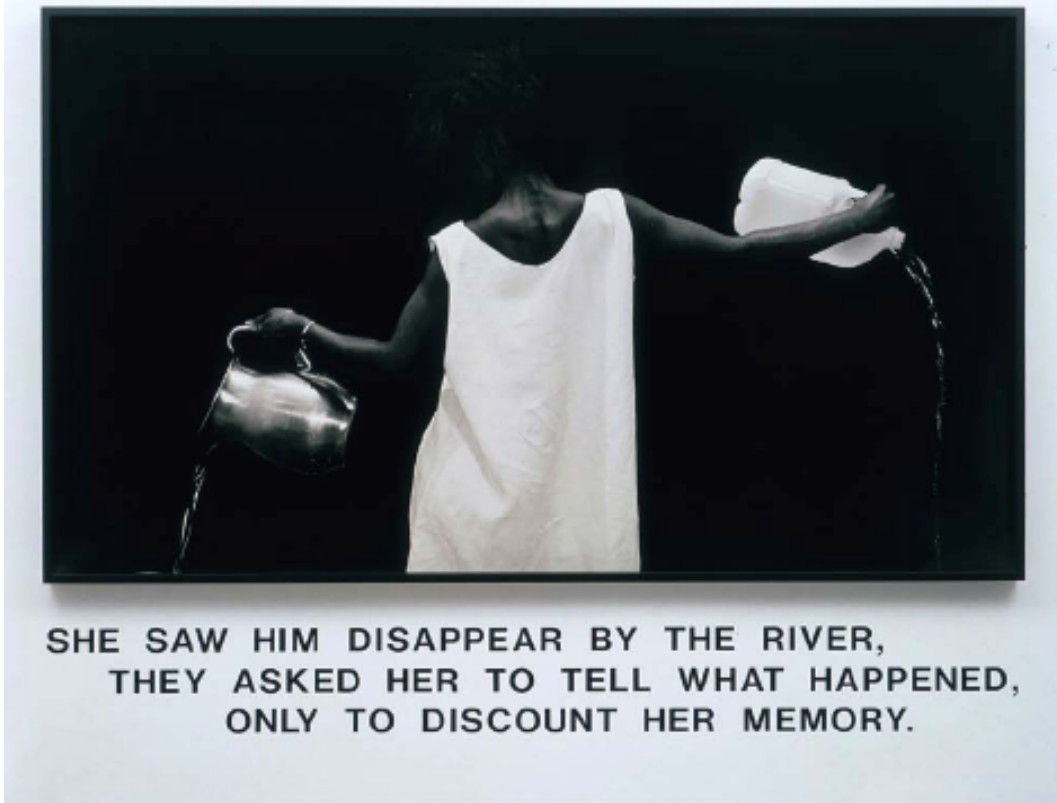


Figure 4

Lorna Simpson

Waterbearer, 1986

Gelatin silver print, vinyl lettering

45 × 77 inches (framed), 55 × 77 inches overall

Collection Sean and Mary Kelly, New York

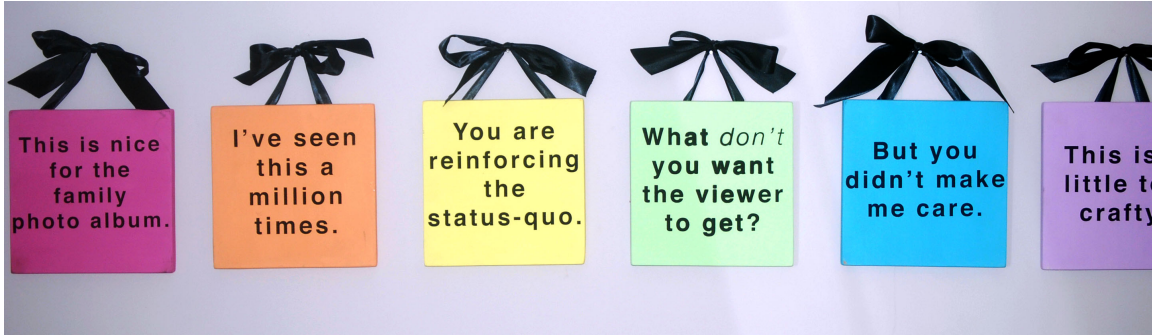


Figure 5

Virginia D. Millard
Installation View *Keepsakes*, 2010
Silkscreen on MDF, Ribbon
Approximately 10"x10" each



Figure 6

Virginia D. Millard
Detail *Keepsakes*, 2010
Silkscreen on MDF, Ribbon
Approximately 10"x10" each

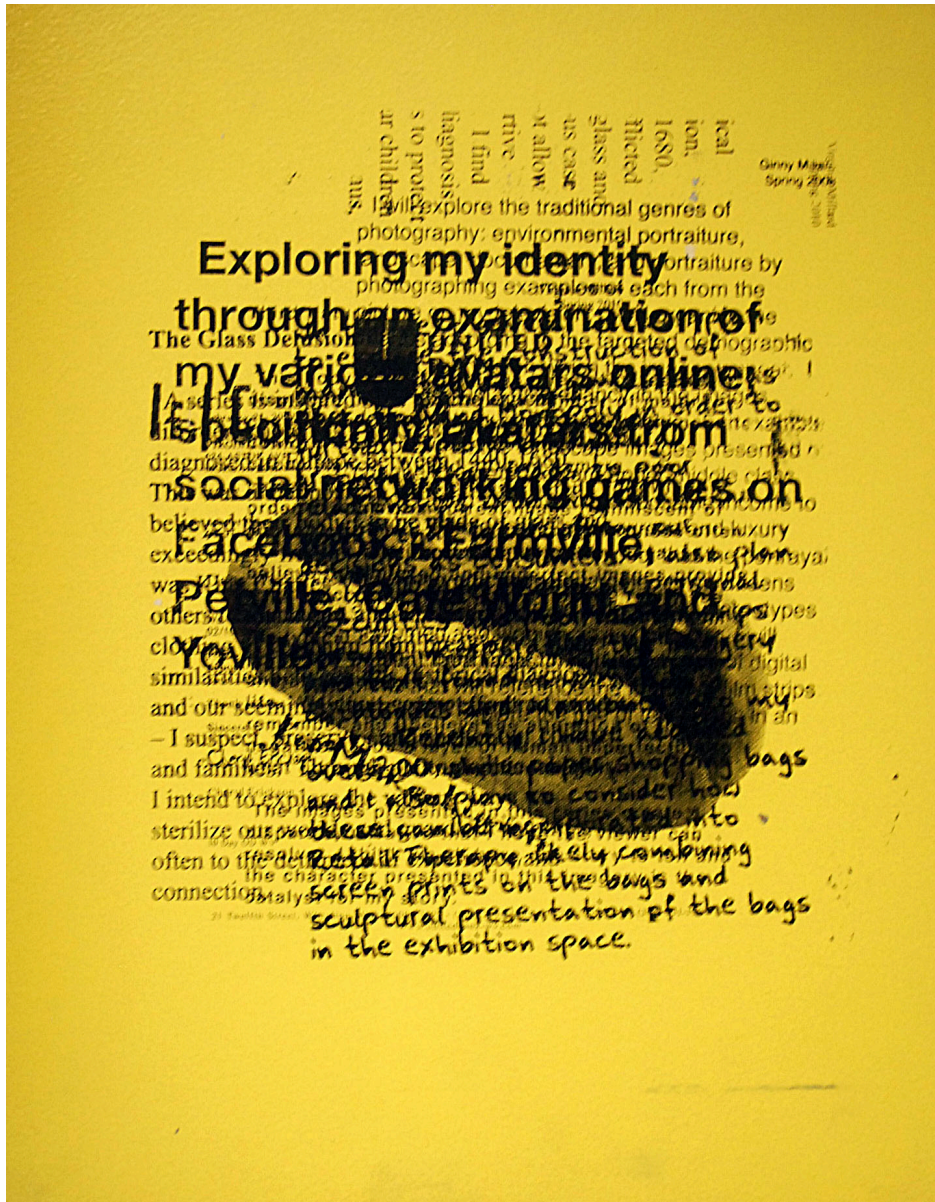


Figure 7

Virginia D. Millard
*Something From Nothing: proposals, plans,
 and sketches for things I never made, 2010*
 16"x20", Silkscreen and Acrylic on Canvas



Figure 8

Virginia D. Millard
Installation View *Facebook Haikus*, 2010
Digital Prints
8"x8" each



Figure 9

Virginia D. Millard
Lil' Wayne, 2010
From *Facebook Haikus*
Digital Print, 8"x8"



Figure 10

Virginia D. Millard
Bad Mother, 2010
From *Facebook Haikus*
Digital Print, 8"x8"



Figure 12

Virginia D. Millard
Yours, Mine, Ours
from *Panties and Pronouns*, 2011
Silver Gelatin Photogram, 20"x24" each

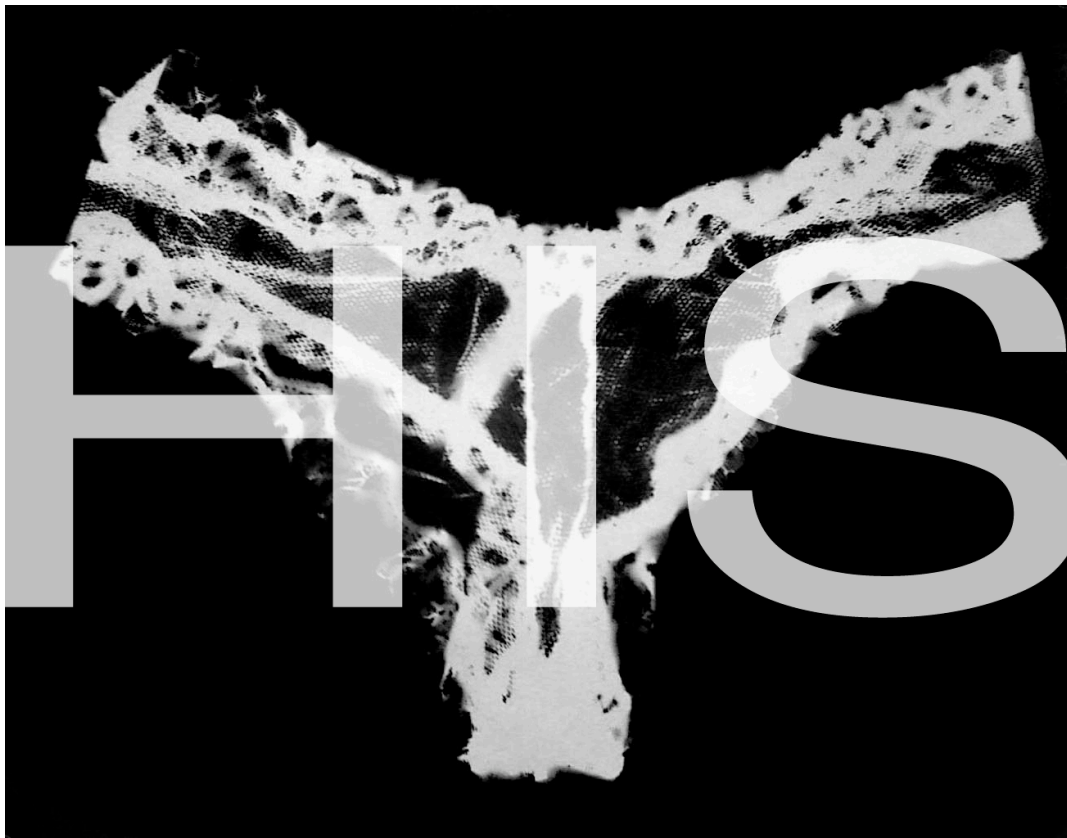


Figure 13

Virginia D. Millard

His

from *Panties and Pronouns*, 2011
Silver Gelatin Photogram, 20"x24"



Figure 14

Virginia D. Millard
Installation view *David's Ties*, 2010.
Vinyl and Acrylic on MDF, steel
Each approximately 8"x6'4"



Figure 15

Virginia D. Millard
David's Tie 4: Ideal Dinner Party, 2010.
Vinyl and Acrylic on MDF
Approximately 8"x6'4"

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Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION

- 2011 West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV
Master of Arts Candidate, Intermedia
- 2007 Coastal Carolina University, Conway, SC
Bachelors of Arts, Studio Art

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- June 2010 Inside The Box, Paull Messaros Gallery, West Virginia University,
Morgantown, WV
- February 2010 You're a Cheese Sandwich, Fast Forward Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
- July 2008 WVU M.F.A. Candidates, Festival, Charleston, WV
- May 2008 Advanced Photography Exhibition, LAI Architecture,
Morgantown, WV
- March 2008 Wild and Wonderful, Asterisk Gallery, Cleveland, OH
- December 2007 Alternative Photography Exhibition, SoZo, Morgantown, WV
- May 2007 Senior Exhibition, Rebecca Randall Bryan Gallery, Coastal
Carolina University, Conway, SC

EMPLOYEMENT

- 2007-present Graphic Designer, Glennville State College, Glennville, WV

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 2008-2011 Instructor, Pinhole Photography Workshop
Hidden Promise Scholars Summer Academy, Glennville
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- 2005-2006 Darkroom Assistant
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