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Mouthful Idol

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MOUTHFUL IDOL

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
Claudia Dishon
December 2008

Accepted by:
Syd Cross, Committee Chair
Christina Hung
Todd McDonald
Anderson Wrangle

ABSTRACT

In my work, I create an imaginative realm as a means to structure chaos. This fictional realm is a place to manifest my perceptions of the world. In alignment with my world view, the pieces exhibit multi-faceted sprays of information meant to explain a more rounded picture of reality. Mental clutter becomes visual clutter when realized in my prints. Recognizable objects, animals, foods, herbs, and written text are layered to form compositions that function abstractly at a distance. A closer inspection reveals identifiable forms within the layers of color and shape.

Haphazard imagery receives the same attention and support as more purposeful symbols. This is a method to reevaluate tragedy and accept it as a learning experience and a cohesive part of a full life. In equalizing benign, profound and tragic symbols in my work I construct a mystical order.

These pieces are an endeavor in personal investigation but they also offer an invitation for the viewer to understand the work. Even if the audience is not made conscious of the specific personal experiences that fuel the symbols, it is still possible to view the work as an exercise in mystical understanding. In relying on familiar forms the viewer may also bring their own experiences to the interpretation of the work.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the people who sustained my imagination through the darkest spell in my life.

Ann Flowers, Nick Shapland, Annmarie Campbell, Jackie Barrett, Kirk Pirlo and Josie Hovis.

Also to Mom, Dad and Phill who have taught me generosity by example.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In my life I have had the good fortune of finding myself in the company of truly magical professors. In regard to this body of work, I acknowledge the Art faculty of Clemson University. Their tireless patience and dedication made this work possible.

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I thank Todd McDonald for his support and solid advice, which helped me navigate the emotional terrain that characterized this journey. I must acknowledge Christina Hung for her humor and her profound observations. Her efforts are an encouragement in the constant battle to be discerning and aware. Also I thank my committee member Anderson Wrangle, who evaluated this document and tried to insure that I said what I meant.

It is with pleasure that I extend gratitude to Dr. Andrea Feeser for her insight and nurturing guidance. Under her direction, I realized discussion and research are sometimes the same thing.

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CHAPTER ONE

MOUTHFUL IDOL

In my work, I create an imaginative realm as a means to structure chaos. This fictional realm is a place to manifest my perceptions of the world. In alignment with my world view, the pieces exhibit multi-faceted sprays of information meant to explain a more rounded picture of reality. Mental clutter becomes visual clutter when realized in my prints. Recognizable objects, animals, foods, herbs, and written text are layered to form compositions that function abstractly from a distance. A closer inspection reveals identifiable forms within the layers of color and shape, like fossils studded in sedimentary rock.

This process of visually organizing these relationships is a psychological endeavor in acceptance. In the controlled realm of the work I can address difficult scenarios from my life and diagram their complexity. The picture plane provides a neutral environment to symbolically represent my struggle with choice. It is an exercise in establishing unbearable instances as components of a natural order.

As a means to cope with tragedy, I render it in my work as equal with images I consider both profound and inane. Everything is democratically organized onto the same plane. Although, hierarchy inevitably occurs through color and composition, the equality exists in how the symbolic forms are given the opportunity to fairly inhabit the space. A haphazard sketch of an ice cream cone receives the same attention and support as a portrait of a beloved pet. The final result is a visual language that embodies both profound experiences and boring ones. Every facet of experience has its place and serves a purpose in the greater spectrum.

In equalizing benign, profound and tragic symbols in my work I construct a mystical order. My approach to this is highly influenced by my interests in ancient art,

esoteric astrology and shamanism. In studying ancient spiritual practices, I perceive correlations between these fields and my daily social interactions. I am fascinated by the ways ancient cultures visually represent their deities and their perspectives concerning life and death.

CHAPTER TWO

PRINT AND DRAWING

I utilize the mediums of printmaking, watercolor and drawing to compose images that both engage the viewer and provide a venue for personal expression. Photo silkscreen enables the transformation of a hand drawn image into repeatable graphic one, as well as physically equalizes visuals into one cohesive layer. By exposing information in to a silkscreen matrix, I can set arbitrary doodle of an ice cream cone, a scribble of an intimate text message and drawings of my aquarium fish all within the same print matrix. When printed simultaneously in the same stretch of color, these images are rendered visually equal. Haphazard imagery receives the same attention and support as more purposeful symbols. Water color and drawing materials are then used to emphasize moments in the prints.

The printmaking mediums of lithography and silkscreen contribute to my creative process. From the beginning, the printing process forces the artist to conceive work in separate layers. In traditional forms of printing these layers are intended to be united into a cohesive whole. For me this approach of constructing an image in layers has evolved into a method to create through chance and accident. Initially layers are conceived separately with little regard as to how they will formally interact with each other. This presents an opportunity to create with impulse and generate imagery that eludes my compositional habits. Likewise it gives each individual icon the opportunity to assert themselves through color and composition on the surface of the paper. I initiate prints with icons and shapes I find compelling but leave the conclusion of the print open ended. Impulsive decisions, accidents and adjustments all contribute to constructing a finished piece. This approach permits a back and forth play between control and accident that encourages intuitive decision making. I do not begin prints with a conceptual goal. Instead I begin pieces and let the creative process unravel the content as the piece develops.

The print process supports the concepts addressed in the work. The very act of pulling a print and reacting to resolve it is a physical labor in generating chaos and bringing it to harmony. Likewise situating icons on the same silkscreen surface for printing becomes a physical way of equalizing the imagery.

CHAPTER THREE

PHILOSOPHY

The work illustrates my tendency to impose significance upon arbitrary or mundane events. I exercise imaginative practices to draw meaning and mysticism out of the everyday. A snack with friends can become a powerful symbol for togetherness. It is a personal exercise but I am not alone in this behavior and feel it to be an attribute of contemporary American culture. Social internet mediums like Myspace and Facebook encourage young people to define themselves through text and image. The making and remaking of these profile pages becomes a constant process of redefining facets of one's personality. Keenly chosen images from pop culture become collages describing an ideology. Interacting with these pages makes symbolism a natural means for me to describe an experience.

In addition to a mystical perspective, I regard mundane happenings as opportunities for poetic observation. I am preoccupied with the poetry of everyday life and disperse spiritual significance into the objects I encounter everyday. In my pieces, these objects are translated into characters that act out psychological dramas. Herbs and other ingredients function like talismans or spiritual guides. It is my philosophy that the text message is the contemporary equivalent to the haiku. When well written they can become a striking piece of poetry that embodies a fleeting moment. Likewise they have the capacity to transport the recipient into immediate intimacy. Particularly compelling text messages are scribbled into several of the printed works. Like the visual debris in the pieces, these messages become part of the material that floats in my mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

VISUAL LANGUAGES

In the prints I communicate with a variety of visual languages, all of which result in some form of visual distortion. Symbolism, color, abstraction, embellishment and text are implemented to translate my experiences into form. Color and decorative embellishment provide an initial encouragement for the viewer to explore the work visually. The chromatically vibrating compositions draw the eye throughout the pieces and encourage the viewer to investigate the work for recognizable forms. The icons that inhabit the work dance between familiarity and abstraction. These images offer the viewer the opportunity to interpret the scenarios in the prints.

Embellishment has a dual function in the work. I consider it a simultaneously absurd and sincere action to garland my forms in decorative motifs. It informs the viewer that the elements they are seeing in the pieces have importance and are to be celebrated. Likewise it satirizes my own inclination toward melodrama regarding the trials and tribulations of daily life.

The pack of gaily spotted sharks is an example of decoration taking an overtly absurd direction. The sharks exhibit psychotic expressions and are clamoring to attack a figure in the upper right of the piece. The sharks represent group mentality and brainless aggression. The scene depicts my experiences with “frat guys”. It elevates those unpleasant but harmless interactions to a mythical challenge. Depicting these scenes in my work becomes a way for me to laugh off my own aggression.

In other moments the decoration denotes genuine celebration of the subject. When depicting herbs in the work, I favor subjects I use in cooking; lavender, sea salt, olive oil, ginger, aloe, parsley, and peppercorns. In the image of basil I depict the tower

form the leaves take when the plant is in flower. This image is flanked by repeated shapes of the basil leaf. The plant components are repeated into heraldic arrangements that emulate lotus forms present in Buddhist Art. Converting the herbs into a decorative motif is intended to glorify the subject and encourage a mystical reading of the symbol.

I am interested in how these ingredients can be used to heal the body. I consider the care and nurturing of the body to be a facet of religiosity and a spiritual obligation. Depicting herbs as decorative elements in the prints pays respect to these practices and reflects my preoccupation with growth.

I use color to create scenarios that are overwhelmingly active. It becomes another means to distort information and subvert hierarchy in the pieces. Through atypical silkscreen printing techniques, I drag multiple colors through the screen at once. Essentially, the silkscreen stencil is used to paint on the surface of the paper. The graphic stencils are dropped in expressive swirls of color. By compiling several layers of stencils I achieve a visually complex pallet. This color complexity is comparable to the overwhelming complexity I perceive in social interactions.

I employ a pallet that references the light and color I associate with technology, marine photography, fashion, cuisine and animation. The prints exhibit an intense pallet reliant on contrasting colors that appear to vibrate against each other. These colors are not organic but are natural in the sense that I interact with them everyday. Animation through its mass availability is a shared childhood experience that unifies a generation. Stores in both product and packaging, favor vibrant colors. It is befitting to fantasize in intense tertiary colors, as these are the colors that typify my interest and daily experience.

When Warhol commodified Marilyn Monroe's image into intense color blocks the implication was one of coldness. Warhol was referencing graphic packaging practices with his intensely contrasting colors. In contrast, when I employ a similarly

graphic and intense pallet I am proposing a very different relationship with media and technology. For myself, and many of my generation the internet, technology and animation represent venues for extreme intimacy. Growing up with the internet I have cultivated and sustained relationships exclusive to digital media. The physical distance implicit in this barrier promotes openness. Likewise the internet affords the possibility for individuals to find others who share obscure interests or beliefs. This sets up relationships that are only sustainable through text and image. Using social networks, text message and chat programs has generated new visual languages. Confessing information through these tools has honed my sensitivity to their power.

Despite my interest in technology, I do not employ computer manipulation to create my prints. Technology is a primary tool for communication in my life and my emotional experience. Interacting with computers, cell phones and web interfaces has changed the way I process information. I am the conduit to manually describe a life complicated with both real and virtual experiences. In consuming variable types of media, it becomes an undeniable facet of the work I produce.

In conjunction with my interests in pop culture, I will my pieces toward garishness. What initially is construed as beauty can tip into the realm of the unbearable. A spectrum of rainbow color is supposed to embody beauty but due to its popularity as a design element for children, it is equally capable of appearing juvenile or cliché. When choosing colors I re-contextualize my imagery within the connotations of the color scheme. This is another method to self mocking. By depicting the trials of my life in a cartoon pallet I am able to ground my frustrations.

These prints are an arena for me to play on the edge between beauty and tastelessness. And even the notion that there is a perceived edge. Culturally we face an onslaught of images that indicate perceptions of beauty or ugliness. In my work, color and decorative forms are piled together in a failed attempt at gorgeousness. This reflects

the sadness of the struggle to stay beautiful and the difficulties people face in a world that values the physical over the mental.

The symbols that appear in the work are drawn from familiar objects and imaginary mythical forms. My interests in cooking, aquarium fish, fashion and Ancient art combine to depict a complicated inner world. Imbued with a sense of mysticism these images become the vocabulary for me to discuss greater issues. They represent the struggle of choice. I personally wrestle with decision making and regret opportunities lost. The colorful debris I create functions as opportunities that bewilder the creatures that inhabit my spaces. Flamboyant piles of laundry on my apartment floor become the cast in a visual epic.

The work is a venue to express my perception that scenarios are complex and multifaceted. Some of it is personal. I lost a friend to a wild animal attack in 2006. This event threatened my sense of natural order, made the world seem nonsensical. This work has been an exercise in picking up the pieces after that event and struggling to find clarity. The sense of ordering, structuring and defining found in the pieces reflects my effort in making sense of tragedy.

The subjects also become a stand in for my own memory. I lament the loss of memories and physical objects in my life often serve as totem reminders of the past. In the most extreme I hoard useless or ruined objects for their sentimental value. A bath towel fouled with a bleach stain becomes a gateway to memories of my old studio space. It is not enough to maintain these objects for the warmth of memories that they hold. Rather I fear that in throwing them away the memories they carry will be forgotten without the tangible reminder. They are keys to a former life. Solidifying their images in my work makes it possible to let the tangible items go while preserving the memory.

Buddhist art inspires my approach to composing symbolic forms. When creating my images I regard the systematic way that imagery is depicted in Buddhist art, particularly the Buddhist cosmological representation of the Wheel of Life. These calendar-like paintings exhibit the cycle of life, death and rebirth with all facets of experience represented. Often color and decoration play important roles in differentiating the content of each symbol. For example the Buddha form often appears multiple times in the same piece with color and gesture variation that allude to different contexts. Mudras, poses and postures also convey specific meanings regarding the interpretation of an image.

Many of my symbols are hybrids. One series is systematically created by unifying a basic animal form, a geometric shape and two dimensional patterning. These figures represent limitation and embody it literally through their oddly matched body parts. They appear ghost-like in several of the printed pieces. They embody negative preoccupations, and their collaged forms and odd postures allude to specific mental challenges that need to be overcome.

One figure features an animal-like head with a fixed gaze, curving off of a stalk neck. This image is intended as a representation of negative criticism and serves as a reminder to curb such behavior. This particular approach is inspired by my interests in Buddhist art which features both decoration and grotesque forms as symbols for positive and negative states of being. In Buddhist Wheel of Life paintings, a life wrought with greed is often depicted as a figure with distended belly and a tiny mouth. The physical state of the figure represents the idea.

Concerning the development of the symbols in my work, I am the culture. The repeated symbols and patterns that inhabit my pieces refer back to experiences in my life. In many ways I am continuing the discussion about life and death and after life. I have an affinity for Wheel of Life paintings because of how they fairly represent a full spectrum

of experience. In my work, these discussions are filtered through a pop culture aesthetic and further distorted by my interests in poetry, animation, illustration and food culture.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCE

When regarding the way I communicate to the viewer I consider the work of video and installation artist Pipilotti Rist. Like, Rist I take recognizable information and imbue it with psychological connotations. This is achieved by presenting familiar images to the viewer with a distinct quality of discord. The discord informs the viewer that the imagery is set in a fantasy realm and the characters inhabiting it have psychological weight beyond their literal appearance. In my work, the subjects appear in synthetic colors, figures are distorted, or three dimensional forms are inexplicably united with two dimensional patterning.

In Rist's video work this quality often translates to a literal distortion of the video either through blurring, altering the time or presenting the figure in unnatural color. Some of Rist's installation pieces communicate through placement and context. In her installation *Himayalaya Sister's Living Room* (2000) glimpses of video are hidden through out a living space, letting the objects express the inhabitant's struggle. Sometimes Rist uses discordant placement to snap a common place situation into a cerebral one, in the piece *Flying Room* (1995) furniture is suspended from the ceiling. Information floats and swirls when it should be static, adding an implication of fantasy to the everyday. Rist uses distortion to indicate she's portraying internal struggles or "psychosomatic symptoms" in her words. As with Rist, I depict images that imply domestic privacy and inner struggle. I also allude to an initial context that indicates how I have chosen to deviate from convention.

CHAPTER SIX

CONTEXT

All of my pieces function based on an initial setting or format. This initial context dictates what information belongs in the two dimensional setting and what information is out of place. Formatting the work this way is a key to activate my imagination and the imagination of the viewer. The work in my thesis exhibition can be broken into three series that each feature a specific context; Dirigible series, Aquarium series and Shield series.

The Aquarium pieces rely on their context of an aquarium to discuss comedy and tragedy on a smaller scale. The act of trying to achieve balance between inert and alive forms in a glass box becomes a metaphor for explaining the full scope of reality. A human relationship, the mysterious functioning of the cosmos, regulation within a body or activity at the cellular level all are mirrored in the conflict of power and resources that I observe within an aquarium.

In the Shield series I use the initial context of a shield as a symbol for a stance against conflict. Within that context the viewer can understand the choices I make. The very basis of the shield form is an enlarged shape of a bivalve sea shell. Sea shells appear in other moments of the work as symbols for self protection and literally as a private internal world. Here the shell is open in triumphant color. Insecurity still functions as a form of protection but the open shell implies readiness and acceptance. These pieces portray my desire to transform my own inner conflict into an asset rather than a hindrance. In its symmetry these shield forms suggests lungs or a rib cage, and seen this way fragile human tissue becomes armor.

Each shield features a “coat of arms” hidden in its surface. Unlike in the Dirigible pieces, these brief printed icons are able to exhibit their details without being covered up or crowded into one another. The shield print *The Battle of Tender Cuts* features a quarter sized print of a cat’s face and the printed text “Toby died.” Toby was a friend’s pet, whose loss impelled my friend to send me the poetic message “Toby died.” as a text on my cell phone. The title of the piece refers lovingly to the cat’s favorite food of the same name. I identified with my friends grief and wanted to honor it in this piece. I regard such sadness as strength.

The Dirigible pieces operate more individually and feature a divergent array of contexts. The piece *Nerds Have Party Nerves* features a social gathering as a context. The foundation of the piece is a rainbow drop of silkscreen information with water color and colored pencil enhancing the scene. The gathering is of looming dress forms, inspired by a catalog of 1920’s fashion. In their luxury these figures suggest elitist unity and intimidate a lone figure into hiding from the festivities. The piece is a tribute to a friend of mine our shared experience of social anxiety.

Another work features the idea of an entrée as a context. The piece *Pasta Constellations* exhibits a variety of spaghetti dishes portrayed outside the traditional range of local color. The initial concept for the pieces was my realization that I never eat the same spaghetti with the same people. I associate specific preparations of the food with memories of people and place. In this piece I represented different incarnations of the pasta and set them before the viewer as choices.

The way I organize these pieces reveals the way I reflect upon situations. The piece *Dinner* is structured around the idea of a dinner held between conflicting forces. Two chairs sit in opposition to each other, the composition further mirroring conflict by shifting from warm red to cool blue. One chair holds a snake, the other a melted ice cream cone, two symbols I do not confer specific meaning but which function as oppositional ideas and a manifestation of conflict in general. This composite symbol can

be interpreted as a confrontation between lovers, or an internal conflict. A discordant meal is laid out on the table, wherein every dish is a trigger to a memory of conflict.

The dinner is a manifestation for the disharmony I feel when trying to sculpt my life and make decisions, as each choice clashes with another. There are both helpful icons and negative ones through out the pieces. Hidden in a spray of orange color on the red side is a negative conglomerate figure alluding to sexual risk. These hybrid figures represent character flaws which are challenges that need to be overcome. Helpful forces are represented with herbs that function like benevolent deities offering their healing powers to the conflict at hand. To convey to the viewer that the herbs go beyond their literal embodiment I alter their color and depict them as decorative forms. Basil is rendered in a snapping blue and coral to describe the flavor of basil without relying on the color green. These color depictions represent aural energy beyond the everyday properties recognizable in the herb.

CHAPTER SEVEN

OPERATION AND CONCLUSION

The prints operate differently depending on the viewer's physical placement to the work. At a distance the works are perceived as abstract compositions of color and shape. Some of the pieces hold their format more clearly from a distance, such as the Aquarium series and the Shield series, both of which resemble their name sakes. The horizontally oriented prints tend to be arranged in loose dirigibles and lose their specific information from farther away. A closer read indicates specific drawings buried within the mass of colors. All of the pieces offer some form of recognizable content when evaluated. These details are only evident when intimately close to the work. The small scale encourages the viewer to recognize the fragility of the situations described in the work and clues the viewer in to the privacy of the content.

To facilitate the viewing of the work, I have made conscious choices concerning its presentation in the gallery space. The prints are set into white upholstered mattes that allude to conventional framing practices but offer a warmer connotation. The puffy fabric connotes impressions of domesticity, dwellings and interior spaces. This contrasts the clinical impression typical of gallery environments. Beyond the frames, I softened the coldness of the gallery by spray painting stencils along the gallery walls. The stenciled forms are essentially enlarged variants of the embellishments that appear in the prints. Together, the upholstered mattes and soft stenciled forms transform the gallery into a sensual, inviting experience for the viewer. This sets the stage for the viewer to perceive the intimate content present in the work.

These pieces are an endeavor in personal investigation but they also offer an invitation for the viewer to understand the work. The pieces have a simultaneously

garish and sensual visual appeal that serves as an initial invitation for the viewer to inspect the work. A second look reveals illustrative forms that carry psychological implications. Even if my audience is not made conscious of the specific personal experiences that fuel the symbols, it is still possible to view the work as an exercise in mystical understanding. By recognizing the familiar forms that populate the prints, the viewer may also bring their own experiences to the interpretation of the work.

IMAGES



Pasta Constellations, Silkscreen, Watercolor, Colored Pencil, 22" x 30", 2008



Dinner, Silkscreen, Watercolor, Colored Pencil, 22 x 30, 2008



Tree Stains, Silkscreen, Watercolor, Colored Pencil, 22 x 30, 2008



Nerds Have Party Nerves, Silkscreen, Watercolor, Colored Pencil, 22 x 30, 2008



Frat Sharks Doin Stuff, Silkscreen, Watercolor, Colored Pencil, 22 x 30, 2008



Broth With Savory Species, Silkscreen, Watercolor, Colored Pencil, 22 x 30, 2008



Aphrodisiac Salad With Snakes, Silkscreen, Watercolor, Colored Pencil, 22 x 30, 2008



This Hunter Measured, Lithograph, Silkscreen, 15' x 22", 2008



Fish Mommy, Lithograph, Silkscreen, 15' x 22", 2008



The Battle of the Bikini Wax, Silkscreen, 22"x30", 2008



The Battle of Tender Cuts, Silkscreen, 22"x30", 2008

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