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Perceptions of the Ordinary

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

By
Natalie Justine Tobacyk

B.A. Louisiana Tech University

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the progression of my work through my graduate studies at the University of New Orleans. I examine the central psychological themes of the human experience. Through painting, drawing, printmaking, and sculpture, I investigate various ways of translating personal and universal experiences into open-ended visual allegories. These psychological narratives are intended to function ambiguously- allowing the viewer to develop their own ideas and responses to the work. Using the figure paired with symbols and also using mass-produced common objects to function as the figure; placing them in ambiguous environments, I juxtapose physical and psychological spaces that evoke emotions, experiences, memories, and identity.

Key words: Sculpture, Drawings, Monotypes, Human Experience, Psychological Space

INTRODUCTION

My work is about examining the human experience, creating symbolic interpretations of emotional and physical reactions. My intention is to turn art making into an abstract metaphor of expressing human experience stemmed from my early exposure to psychological studies and thinking, particularly in areas surrounding Personality Type testing, research and development. My environment was filled with the study of people- what made them individual and the universal qualities that are shared.

My own interests evolved into creating work that explored the human experience- which is a singular yet expansive territory, linking the individual to a greater community. By creating open narratives, my personal intentions can be deliberately blurred, yet maintain some impression of individual background while allowing viewers to make their own associations, some of which will intuitively retain elements of the works original motivations. This open-endedness allows for the work to function in a multifaceted and more complex level, where viewer's personal experiences and interpretations can be relatable to those they observe in the artwork. This intention is supported by theories of the archetype and the studies of symbolic interpretation. What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us¹.

Originally using loosely based versions of myself in ambiguous spaces interacting with objects that were developed as personal symbols in conjunction with universal symbols, I would create psychological narratives focusing on concepts of identity,

¹ Jung, C. G., and Marie Franz. *Man and his symbols*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964, p. 20

anxiety, and tension. Another series of work followed, specifically twin or multiple figures interacting in the same space referencing the relationship between internal dualities and/or conflict.

As my work evolved I began replacing the figure with mass produced objects. These objects reference the individual by acting as a surrogate body. Their unacknowledged presence and utilitarian purposes intends to evoke the conscious and unconscious thought processes. These surrogate “bodies” function dually as the figure and as symbol that references my own personal meaning in combination to the individual as a singular part of a group.

Ideas extracted from Analytical Psychology, the writings of Joseph Campbell as well as my Eastern European and Southern backgrounds have been influences on my work conceptually. Artists Kiki Smith, Amy Cutler, Linda Benglis, and Eva Hesse continue to inform and inspire me in my themes and aesthetic decisions. This thesis will focus on the progression of these open narratives and how they have manifested themselves in forms of paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures and their progression from illustrative narratives into work which functions with more ambiguous narratives and conceptual qualities.

FOLDING CHAIR SERIES

The folding chair series explores the individual’s experiences and relationship with memory by using mass-produced objects designed as placeholders for people. These placeholders are anonymous and utilitarian but are rendered slightly different and layered in fantastic ways. The chair stacks form impossible towers and structures that the figure is part of. These drawings introduce the pink string imagery that will find itself repeated

throughout other works in this thesis. The pink string adds another dimension of human experience as it obsessively ties and wraps, connecting the fantastic chair structures while exploring each individual placeholder and revisiting others. This obsessive binding ties the structure together and gives it another layer of physical and psychological complexity.

The figure is loosely based on me. I made this decision as an effort to explore my memories and feelings and the way I translate them into visual allegories. She is always rendered wearing undergarments that are revealing and at times, unflattering. Clothed in a basic, plain bra and support pantyhose, the figure is meant to represent the exposed self or the private self. The viewer becomes voyeur- looking at a person not yet prepared to be seen. This physical exposure implies to the viewer that this is a private, unprotected moment. Parts of the figure's body are exposed, and uncontained by the undergarments, spilling over in areas where it is meant to be contained, giving the figure an imperfection. It is important for the figure to be wearing undergarments that are meant to contain the female form, attempting to reshape and adjust it, taking on a more literal layer of the vessel imagery and the containment of something, whether it is physical or psychic.

The figure never becomes idealized through the support and bindings of the garments, in fact, the spilling out of the flesh gives the figure an imperfection that is usually masked or exposed privately. The figure is physically exposed and awkward- illustrating a moment of privacy, both physical and mental. In this physical state the figure is connected to the fantastical folding chair formations with the pink string or as a piece of the support system. She is a part of the greater structure that she is found in.

Where the chairs become placeholders or surrogates for people, the figure becomes a support element and part of the chair structure.



Figure 1: Chair Binding, 2010

Not only is she experiencing the psychological space, she becomes a part of the space as well. The space is pushed farther into a dream like plane because of the absence of horizon, background, and shadows. The viewer is left with an unreal and absurd scenario, which is meant to embrace the ambiguity of the situation. The stark white of the background becomes an endless and fantastical space that the figure and objects are in.

The combination of the folding chair forms with the wrapping and searching of the string creates a layered visual allegory. The utilitarian objects transform into open-

ended symbols. The chairs become placeholders for people. They represent a potential place for someone to sit or where someone has been. Their function becomes more ambiguous when they are layered and stacked in unbelievable formations which are no longer inviting, normal spaces for someone to sit, but a repurposed object, maintaining its identity as a place holder and also becoming a piece of a larger entity.

The multiplying of the one folding chair is important because it plays with the idea of the individual experience that is inevitably connected to the larger group or experience that can be compared and interpreted. The chairs also represent a psychological space. There are no longer occupants, simply the indication and possibility of one. As the string is obsessively wrapping around and traveling through as a continuous linear experience, it gives the indication that someone had to experience this wrapping, the journey of trying, connecting, skipping, and retracing. The string parallels physical experience, retracing and connecting, while constantly moving through and around to a psychological experience of memory and the retracing and connection from one person or experience to the next.

These drawings later informed a sculptural body of work where the imagery of the chairs and string manifested into a pure, matte white sculpture that physically brings in the impossibility of the chair formations into a three-dimensional space. The piece is a collection of folding chairs that have been welded together to form a sculpture that defies gravity and the technical elements of folding chairs. The sculpture is shown in a corner space with matte white walls and on a low standing matte white pedestal. The base chair is precariously standing on one leg, tilting at approximately a 45 degree angle. This illusion of impossibility introduces the fantastical elements from my drawings into a

tangible space, bringing in the psychological space into actual space. The illusion of one continuous florescent pink string is wrapped obsessively around and throughout the sculpture; however, the string is never wrapped in such a way that it is believable that it is a structural support to the sculpture. The reflection of the florescent pink of the string will give the sculpture a slight glow, playing up the ethereal quality of the piece. The string gives the illusion of infinity, and at one point, it leads off of the sculpture and is seen as passing through the wall.



Figure 2: Chair Binding Sculpture, 2012

BAGS SERIES

My interest in utilitarian vessels as a metaphor continues to bring me back to the imagery of a plastic bag, always transparent, containing a liquid or unidentifiable visceral content. After experimenting with multiples, playing with the concept of the individual's relationship to a universal connection or collective consciousness, I focused on the mass-produced household Ziploc bag. Using an object that is so utterly ordinary and constant in everyone's lives, transforming it into a unique vessel with a complex purpose and presence- abstractly metaphorical in expression.

I explored the potential of the Ziploc bag as a surrogate figure through sculptural and printmaking modes. The casts of the bags are made of opaque white resin mounted on a white wall; the intensely colored fluorescent monoprints of bags expelling or revealing their contents both reflect the concept of the individual as a vessel, the psychological substance of that individual and physical manifestation of psychic content.

The casts of five different Ziploc bags, differing in size, amount of implied content, and manipulated shape, are installed in an evenly spaced row at eye level. These casts are all unique yet stem from the same domestic and mass produced object. The mass production emphasized through the icon of the original Ziploc bag then being transformed into a unique manipulated cast object of varying contents, size, and shape; yet again being reproduced as cast multiples referencing the connection of the individual within a group. Referencing sameness and part of a whole, yet maintaining a personal uniqueness.

The casts are made by filling various sized Ziploc bags with plaster, manipulating them as they dry and modeling them through multiple layers of poured plaster. Once the

desired form is found the bags are mounted into a containment box and a silicone mold is poured, covering the entire bag. Once the silicone has cured the plaster and plastic bag are removed from the silicone and resin is poured into the mold. Throughout this process of creating multiples of a mass produced object manipulated into a unique form I began experimenting with manipulating the cast object through various pouring techniques and manipulation during curing times. This experimentation has lead to slight nuances and imperfections of each cast. These nuances gave yet another level of singularity to each vessel, referencing the experience of being human- finding commonality within a greater group yet maintaining a personal identity.



Figure 3: Bag Series, 2011

This circular examination touches on the collective consciousness of people- all the same, all inevitably experiencing emotions while maintaining a sense of personal identity. This juxtaposition of the universal, the mass, which fragments into the unique individual, is the experience and phenomenon I am addressing. The monoprints have a dual quality of repetition, functioning as a mass produced object and the unique expulsion of their contents. The pressing out of the contents creates a stain and a visual effect, which vary from, slow and calm to forceful and violent.



Figure 4: Expulsion Series, 2011

The bags along with the expulsion of fluorescents and golds are intended to reference the internal experience and personal expression. The colors of pigments in the expulsion remove the object from its' usual utilitarian purpose into an organic, visceral

body, functioning as a surrogate for the human figure. The process of the ordinary object that transforms into a new object through the printing experience is expressed through final product and process. The ordinary transcends into a visceral state.

The process of inking the bags filling them with various mixtures of ink, paint, pigment and air become an important conceptual element to the piece. As the bags are rolled through the press the pressure expels their contents and produces an image and embossment of the bags with the stains of the forced out contents. The experience of the expulsion becomes physical and audible, as air and other contents are forced out. This physicality directly connects the printing process to the conceptual weight of the prints-as metaphors for the figure and the relationship of the physical self and the internal, private self.



Figure 5: Expulsion Series, 2011

DUALITIES SERIES

The series, Dualities, are based on the psychological assessment inkblot test developed by Herman Rorschach. The original test was used to analyze individual's psychological interpretations of various inkblot images, finding recognizable imagery and discussing associations with those images. This assessment was developed as "an objective ways of sampling, codifying, and drawing inferences from individual differences in styles of cognitive structuring."

My use of the inkblot concept is a tongue and cheek play with personal ideas of imagery, symbolism, and associations. I choose images based on a bank of personal imagery used in my work that I designate as both personal and universal associations. These images are then loosely painted and given the aesthetic of an inkblot through layers of washes, pours, and sprays, but not abstracted enough where the original image is completely lost. I dictate the image that will be "discovered", however, the personal associations of the viewer are uncontrolled.

The original inkblots were traditionally black on white paper, some with small areas of color. I chose to use florescent pink washes paired with some gold, white, and opalescent pigments. These florescent paintings are intrusive and uncomfortable. The brightness of the color stays with the viewer and is transferred on to other paintings and objects around the space. The images are rendered as a mirror image, attached at a chosen point and repeated as though the paper was folded and an image was transferred on each side of the fold. This doubling of the image directly references the original inkblots that were created by folding and forming a symmetrical image. This doubling of the image suggests the idea of dualities that are present in previous works. The dimensions of the

paintings are 18” by 18” and cut with rounded corners referencing flash cards. These enlarged, intrusive inkblots should evoke a curiosity and discomfort for the viewer.



Figure 6: Dualities Series, 2012

This series contains ten “inkblot” paintings- referencing the original Rorschach test plates. The images I have chosen range from animal symbols, utilitarian objects, food, religious objects, and name brand objects. None of these objects are intended to relate to one another through any associations aside from the fact that they are presented in a series. Each image functions on its’ own an independently image, meant to be discovered and interpreted. The uncertainty of the viewers associations is important to the piece- there is no correct or incorrect interpretation of the painting, even though there is a specific image that each painting is based on. This plays with the subjective and, objective nature of the original Rorschach test. The process of the viewer examining

these “inkblot” paintings and drawing associations reinforces the idea that the imagery is specifically functioning as a symbol meant for interpretation and free associations. When these paintings are seen in conjunction with my other work, the allusion to an iconic psycho-diagnostic test is transferred to the other pieces, which are then viewed in the same psychological examination or interpretation.



Figure 7: Dualities Series, 2012

CONCLUSION

My interests involving the examination of the human experience through dualities and concepts of archetypal imagery have manifested into a multi disciplinary art exploration. Translating these concepts into open visual allegories, which allow me to examine my own experiences and feelings and communicate them to an audience who will draw associations-objective and subjective relating to my work. These psychological narratives are intended to function ambiguously- allowing the viewer to develop their own ideas and responses to the work. I elevate mundane, mass-produced, common objects, and transform them into surrogates for the figure, creating metaphorical spaces for viewers to enter. Through the process of drawing, printing, and sculpture, I juxtapose physical and psychological spaces that evoke universal emotions, experiences, and memories.

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VITA

Natalie Tobacyk was born in Louisiana in 1984 and grew up in North Louisiana and Poland. She attended Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana, graduating Magna Cum Laude in 2007 with a Bachelors of Fine Arts in Studio Art and a minor in Art History. She attended the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland in 2006. She moved to New Orleans in 2009 to study at the University of New Orleans. She currently lives in New Orleans.