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Sun Spots

by

Crista Cammaroto

M.F.A., University of Colorado, 1997

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the
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degree of the Master of Fine Arts
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University of Colorado at Boulder



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This Thesis for the Master of Fine Arts Degree by
Crista Cammaroto
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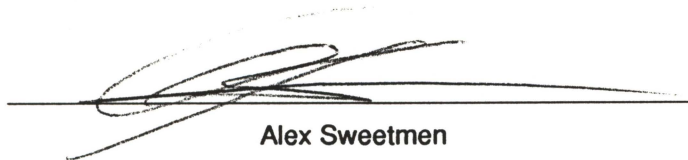
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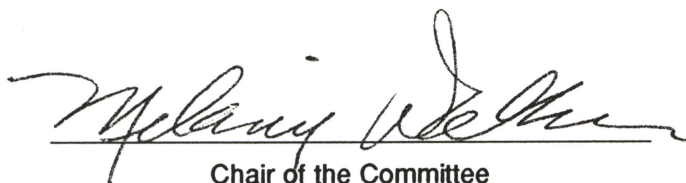


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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts
Crista Cammaroto has submitted this written thesis as
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and slides which are in the possession of the
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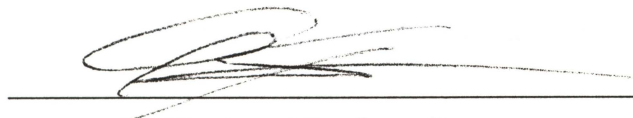
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Member of the Committee



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Crista Cammaroto. 1996.

Sun Spots

a n a u t o b i o g r a p h i c a l h i s t o r y

Four years old, 1970: My parents are in their wedding clothes inside a drop of water, I try to break through it so they don't float away, I'm in a large field, there are three suns in the sky burning very bright, a ladder reaches close to them, they have my entire family and I offer to give myself to get my family back. **Five years old, 1971:** My mother is coming into my bedroom at night for the fifth time, why do you think the Angel of Death is in here, my father rushes in, his big hand slaps my face and suddenly I know I have nothing to be afraid of. **Labor: 8/90:** A bird is convulsing and I go to pick it up, it flops out of my hands into the oil pan, (I can't get the oil off of it, its getting worse), I can feel every bone crush beneath my boot as if I were barefoot. **Hot summer night, August 10, 1992:** I have money in the back of the house, you can have it all just don't take her. I call my sister every night for three months, strong steady hugs and a gun under the bed, I become fixated with her as a little girl. **August 93:** Last day of work, Linda walks in with the biggest bunch of sunflowers I have ever seen, I bring the new woman to the post office and make the same wrong turn three times. We get back and the phone wrings, No water to hold your eyes, no longer your mouth. **Funeral: 11/93** I've screamed at my family all afternoon, a red dress from my father, my mother tells me I'm bleeding through my dress, stop in the bathroom, I let myself bleed, gallons of nervous water through layers of clothing. **Mexico: 11/93** I wake up in the morning in another country so I can pretend this is not my life, I sit on the roof of the gate house and watch the Magpies fly by, I watch the clouds swoop and the sun changes. I have been on the roof for 5 hours, I do this every day, I separate myself whenever I can. There is an old woman standing by a great fire, she is burning the dead crops so she can plant a new one. **Mexico: 12/96** The sun, a solitary woman, I can't sleep because I'm sweating so much, the fever has started a large sore on my ear, maybe this will stop me, I wake up and find my left eye on the corner of the table for no reason, it is now black. **1993-1994** Supposed knowledge of any kind seems to be reduced to a lie, if you come near me with solace I'll spit on you. **Summer 94: Solar eclipse,** I looked right at it. **Home: 3/94** On the ground, wrapped in a blanket to keep warm, below a big forest of old growth trees, I sit for an entire day staring at the sun through the trees, I trust its movement across the sky. **Sourdough Trail: 10/94** The silvery blue dead pine branches everywhere like lace, I remain fixated on the ground. **Sleep 94:** Big red billowing wings that move like a fish, I'm flying just beneath a blue sky, some people look up, I look back and fall landing on my very heavy horse hoofs, I was surprised I had them, can't make it up again past four feet. **The top of Sawtooth Mt. alone: 7/95** I can't stand strait up, it seems really presumptuous to be this high, I am convinced that I am going to fall down because of the thunderheads creeping down my neck, I've been alone for three days and meet a Vietnam vet, he asks me when I died. I give him my papaya, he gives me his chocolate. **Sleep 96:** They have been keeping him up in an attic for paraplegics, he is strapped to the bed, I am not aloud to touch him, I come back every day in hopes that he will feel me, I come back and a large bike racer is giving him shock therapy, I come back again and they have taken his skin off, words cannot come out of my mouth. **July 96: Full Moon,** bluebirds in the periphery, big hands beneath me show me how to float, my sister comes out for a visit, we hike in the rain until the sun comes out.

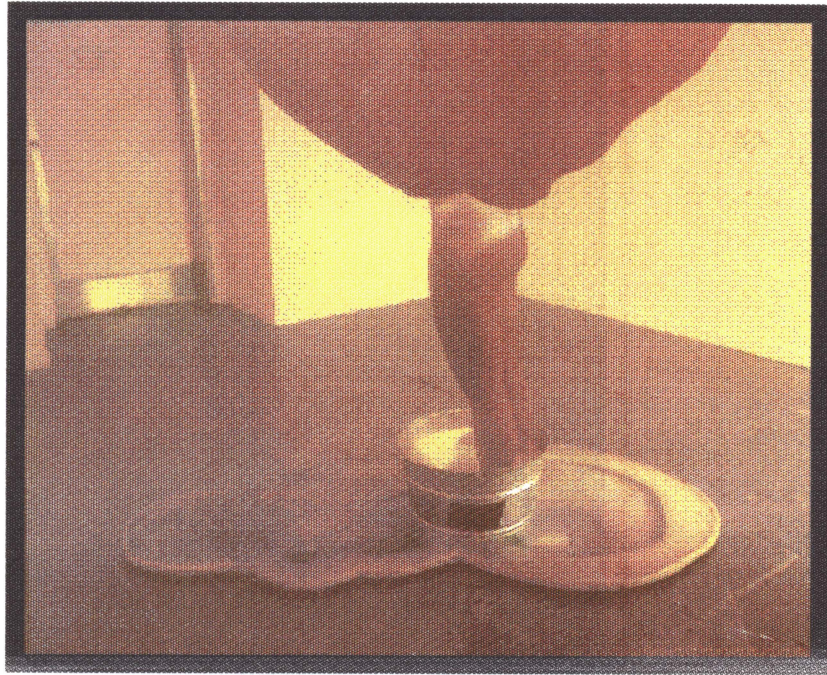
An Autobiographical History of Performance and Installation

My work became the place where I could become bigger than myself and bigger than the experiences that loomed over my head. I could open the faucet and the work would rush out. But like any pressure, when first released it can be scary and confusing. Once I started to physically struggle with my work, the necessity for process became clear. The more strenuous labor involved the better I felt. But, the idea of attacking a piece of work to reach clarity only revealed more confusion. I had to find a way to infuse my work and the viewer with unanswerable questions. Hence, my work came to orient itself around ideas of process: it had to be continuous, moving, and strive to escape the limitations of definite form. My repetitive obsession with wondering eventually interpreted itself into the idea of performance. Pain and reference to the physical body have become redundant in the sensationalized world of performance art. Although I have always enjoyed dramatic narrative, the sensational in my work becomes how much I care to invest rather than how much of my body I slice up for the audience. My work is about pain, but it is even more about recovery and the love of self that eventually leads to simple survival. In my recent performance/installations, I portrayed a spiritual tenacity that could handle my mourning. I wanted to demonstrate something similar to eating a small piece of black tar every day knowing that I will never finish it, need never enjoy it, and have no choice but to eat it.

My emotions were changing as fast as my mediums. Every time I set out to create a piece, I had the added task of learning several new techniques. Film due to its tendency towards a linear progression was a great way to throw in everything due to the narrative simplicity of time. Installation could communicate ideas of confinement and grandiosity.

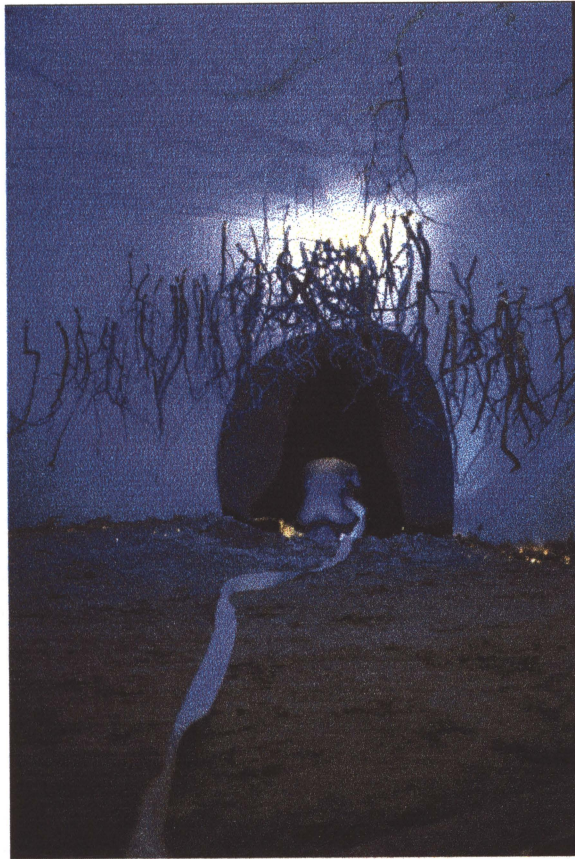
“Death Work” (performance/installation) A small hole with red lining on the floor will let you in, it is dark and you can't see but you can hear the wind. Your eyes start to adjust to seeing nothing and you start to see dead branches on the ceiling, all over the corner of the room. There is something breathing in the corner, all bunched up. It is a woman with her back turned to you, very silent and stubborn. She is writing on a small strip of paper leading out through a slot in the doorway. People come by and read the paper, some walk in the room, instantly get nervous and leave. Others enter and start talking to the silent woman like a therapeutic confessional. Some people sit there silently. The chemistry of the room changes depending upon the participants but the woman starring in the corner remains constant and turned away.

Performance, coupled with the rigorous physicality of installation work, became a perfect match for me. The sad silence in the work soon transformed into rage and an actual demonstration of pain became a necessity. But, this pain was demonstrated with endurance rather than self mutilation. Performance was a way to charge the atmosphere with the living presence. This physical presence spoke indexically rather than symbolically. The tension created a collaborative atmosphere, every person who entered the space altered the content of the work. I found this collaborative tool, at its best, to inspire a greater investment or refusal from the viewer.



Tornado Received
(performance/installation)
Dudley Alcove, 1995
Sibell Wolle Fine Arts

Figure 1



**Death Work
(installation/performance)
Installation Room, 1995
Sibell Wolle Fine Arts**

Figure II

“Dead Butterflies” (performance) A woman is in one of the slide rooms. She is held together with duct tape so she won't break. The tape is so tight and strong that she is having trouble breathing. Her arms are waving as if to fly, and holding many birthday candles that are dripping on to the floor. There is a large hole in her armor over her heart showing flesh that looks burnt. **Text:** When I was young I used to catch butterflies, because they were so beautiful. I decided to start collecting them. I put them in a jar with a cotton ball full of alcohol and I slowly watched them die, I could only handle this one more time. I never did it again. One day a bird flew into the oil pan and started to convulse. A woman I knew dying of cancer walked up and told me to kill it. I felt all its little wings crunching beneath my feet. Walking on the side of the highway I notice dead butterflies every where.

The irony in this performance was what occurred afterwards. It took four people to take the duct tape off my bare body and the process left broken capillaries and bruises everywhere. In addition, my duct tape costume was so tight I could not breathe. This made it clear that a quick thrill for me and my audience could easily be had by actually risking something. In this case, I truly almost suffocated. And what I was communicating to my audience seemed to communicate a sensationalism that was not appropriate to the content of the work.

“Black Hole Series” (performance/installation) There is a woman down the long hallway in a dimly lit space, her bandages wrap around her body and strap her to the walls like a strait jacket. Stars are projected onto a black hole in the middle of her chest. She puts pins in what looks like scar tissue around the hole where the stars used to be.
Text: Leonard Cohen *“Joan of Arc”*

The hole has had its own evolution throughout my work. It began as a spinning black disc or wheel on the floor. Above it, almost touching, was a leg leaping through the air. Branches behind the leg became vibrant wishes for survival while confronting a precarious ground. (*“Grace Under Pressure”*) The hole then became symbolic of the abyss. It was painted into the corner where I sat and stared for five days. (see *“Death Work” figure I*) The hole then lead into referencing the body by physically depicting a whole in the chest through costume. (*“Dead Butterflies”*) Needles were used to poke at and wake up the dead self inside the hole. (*“ember” 16mm film*) Out of the hole popped a focal point and I reached out of the hole of a red tornado and into a bucket of milk standing over the soothing cavernous hole of an ear. (see *“Tornado Received” figure II*) This spot of magical vacancy took on a more vaginal form when I carved a tear shaped hole into a 100 year old, 2 ton silver leaf maple tree stump, and filled it with water. The hole became the release of a tear, the cleansing of water, and a hope for the healing of memories stored inside the body. (see *“To Hold” figure III*) The final evolution of this hole was willful over-growth. Making the hole smaller but intensified, it became the lens in which to view the outside world. (see *“Sun Spots” figure IV*)

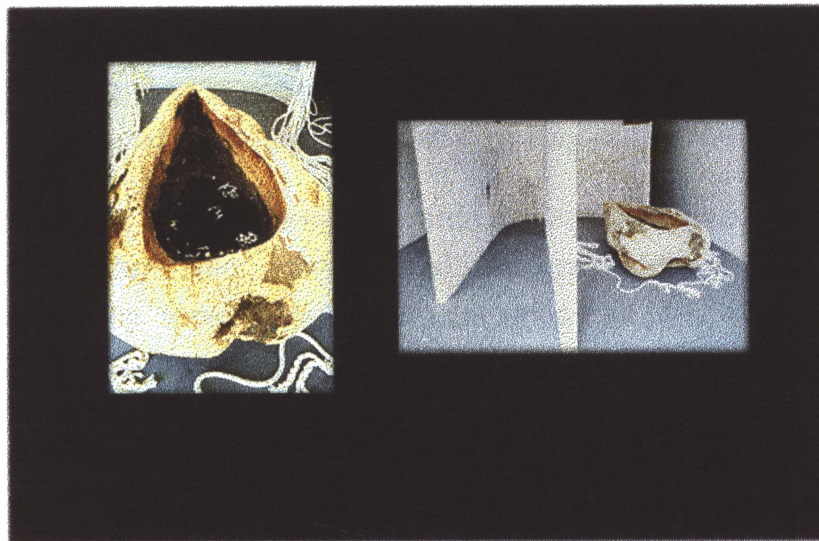
To Hold

mixed media installation
Edge Gallery, Denver

“To Hold” was an exhibition created to investigate the power of one human being to hold another. We are all born with two arms, beautiful instruments of expression and physical prowess. Arms can be used to embrace another or to hold one against their will. This exhibition acts as a witness to both.

Rape remains an issue uncomfortable to all in society, and despite the psychological trends of openness, in many ways the issue continues to exist in silence. (Silence can be a relief or simply a continued restraint.) Like members of a secret clan the issue gets circulated primarily inside groups of victims and survivors. Representation outside this circle tends to get romanticized or eroticized as a horrific thrill for the public to consume. The largest societal recognition of this repeated problem has been the media. Unfortunately the coverage has in many cases become a voyeuristic festival of trauma witnessing. News broadcasts have resorted to objectified listings of recent rapes and despite their continued growth in numbers a greater portion still remains unreported. As a veteran witness to this type of crime, I came to realize that stories of rape only reach the ears of those fated with similar stories.

This exhibition speaks from a stance one step removed yet still close to the survivor. Although the installation depicts a metaphorical narrative, it does not place blame or tell a specific story. Instead the work focuses on the psychological futility of the event and the tremendous healing work that follows. “To Hold” was an open dedication to survivors of this crime and the many organizations and individuals who have contributed to the recovery from this socially ignored problem.



To Hold
(installation/performance)
Edge Gallery, Denver, CO 1996

Figure III

Sun Spots

statement of thesis installation

How high can you go before you are reminded of your mortality? This is a question raised in my thesis exhibition. Wonder Woman, Don Quiote, and Icarus all share an undeniable idealism, a focus on building a character that can do anything. A focus when taken to its highest level suddenly turns into blindness. Don Quiote mistook windmills for evil wrong doers that must be stopped by his might alone. Icarus flew too close to the sun and melted, causing him to fall to the earth like a mere mortal. The myth of the hero is eccentricly displayed through many hybrid characters of our society. The need for a hero is endless so why not become one.

I have polarized this tendency towards dramaticism through recognizing my own tendency to escape into a character with far greater capabilities than my own. Out of the hole in my chest sprouts a crocus while I sit in a super hero flying uniform, swinging, beneath a fifteen foot steel wingspan. These wings not only hold the flames of fourteen chandelier candles, they suspend my own body as I hover over the blood of a tree stump rooted in a giant arc of vegetation, green enough to bring me down. There is a dilemma that exists. On the one hand Icarus can not help but fly escape into the brightness of the sun. On the other hand, the heat of passion melts his wings, causing him to fall to earth and become the mortal self. In my installation, after landing, I am once again the every day character that can not deny the pain of being human nor the ever-present pull of gravity. Modern psychology has coined this love for extremes states as bi-polar or manic depressive. As an artist I have explored this tendency as a well traveled individual who is in need of authentic self deification to ensure a healthy flight and a safe landing. My idealism of this drama not only plays on the triumph and ability of a person but the honesty in recognizing the ridiculous predicaments that run repetitive circles in the psyche as a result of this travel. I am trying to fly but with steel wings. I am trying to fly to the sun but it is only a reflection on the ceiling. I can not land without walking through the blood of being a mortal. In addition, I have to force things to grow and bloom around me in a very unnatural environment. These are the tasks of the clumsy super hero in my performance. While I am busy visiting these extremes on a swing of wings, time lapse footage reveals the movement of the sun through a small lens on the wall behind me. The world keeps spinning and so do I.

"While fantasy in the miniature moves toward an individualized inferiority, fantasy in the gigantic exteriorizes and communalizes what otherwise might be considered "the subjective."We want the antique miniature and the gigantic new"1 Susan Stewart, "On Longing"



**Sun Spots
(performance/installation)
Sibell Wolle Fine Arts, 1996**

Figure IV

In my installation the circular spell of up and down is celebrated rather than scorned. It mimics the existence of dualism but as a riddle that enriches rather than depletes. My willingness to sit on the swing for two hours a day, water the plants, and set up the UV lights is a process to demonstrate a dedication to "process". My work has also, always had a "red feather" complex, or a tendency to display like an animal in danger, and make oneself big. The being in danger must deify the self by trying to become as tall as the tidal wave that is ready to swallow it.

My work as an artist has always been a very invested passionate response to the shooting stars that blast through my armor from places and reasons unknown. The holes in the armor remain deep and vacant for what seems like an eternity until the unavoidable call to grow finds its way back in. This desire for growth becomes a call to extremes, a call to move from the subterranean up to the sky where all is uncertain except the burning of the bright sun. Obsession with the sun is understood when considering its power to support life. Plants grow towards the sun, babies crawl and become upright, water tries to jump off the earth and forms a tide. The desire to fly towards the sun, defying the limitations of gravity is a desire shared by many living things. But, like a moth to the flame, when pursuit is at any cost the creative aspiration becomes the destructive. The desire to be more than we are, have more than we have, drive faster, and live longer, is the same desire that created the atom bomb. The laws of gravity eventually humble the laws of passion and the landing is inevitable. As sure as the sun rises and sets, there is a return to the body, a pull to the earth, and a reconciliation with mortality.

Sun Spots Exploding (text for performance)

if I run faster maybe, I can be like the wind and go anywhere., cry louder and maybe I'll get it., the sun shines just to keep me alive. the fan that went so fast, I just had to stick my finger in it, if I dive into that big wave will I come out the other side? I don't think your hand is that strong, if I keep my back strait can I float all day, if I keep jumping, maybe if I kiss you enough I'll stop worrying, if I keep riding, if that I could love you better than anyone else, if I can stay up all night for five days, if I look up one hundred times every single day of my life do you think that one day maybe, I could spin the world back like super man, and save Lois Lane, find some copper bracelets to diminish the threat of those four bullets, get some magical substance to erase, the mark of that 2x4 on my head, the finger I almost lost, that time I couldn't save you, all the asphalt I've kissed, the 457 zits I had to pick, thousand year old tree stumps and the door I kicked in, the teeth I broke, the rake I stepped on, the eighteen wheeler that missed me and got you, the parachute that didn't open, the first twenty times I had sex, the medal I got for having the most seconds places, getting a head ache from holding my breath under water, and if the ocean weren't so big my mother wouldn't have had to make me count backwards from a hundred and drink warm milk before bed and I wouldn't have to show my father that those big ass demons are following me too and I 'm still fighting them, I have 636 places on my body that show proof, and when I look in the mirror and see more marks and the blood slowly begins to drip and the mud encircles my feet so I can not pick them up, I will count backwards from 100 imagine the ocean mist on my face, drink warm milk and try to feel at home.

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