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MARGINALIZED BEAUTY, STRUGGLE, AND PRESENT REALITY

by

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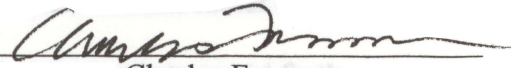


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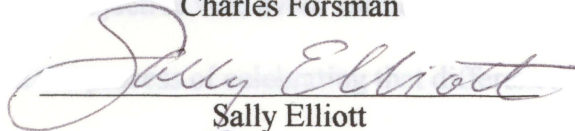
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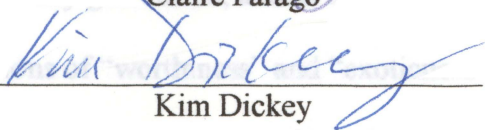
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Marginalized Beauty, Struggle, and Present Reality

Thesis directed by Professor Celeste Rehm

The three essential objectives of my current artwork all surround notions of beauty, struggle, the mundane present, reality, and marginalization. The first objective is to record and celebrate the juxtaposition of a person's sense of struggle, oddity, and difference with the beauty and strength of that struggle. The second is to illuminate the present and the mundane rather than hide the truth by romanticizing the past and future. The third objective is to avoid further categorizing and exoticizing of marginalized people in the process of celebrating that difference. I achieve these goals by using mundane materials, forms, and content and in the process remain authentic to my cultures, to my generation, and to myself. I simultaneously reject contemporary artistic notions of "worthiness" and "exoticness" and embrace the everyday rhythms of life as the primary means through which we construct and reconstruct ourselves and our relationships with others.

MY OBJECTIVES:

The three essential objectives of my current artwork all surround notions of beauty, struggle, the mundane present, reality, and marginalization. My first objective is to record and celebrate the juxtaposition of a person's sense of struggle, oddity, and difference with the beauty and strength of that struggle. The second is to illuminate the present and the mundane rather than hide the truth by romanticizing the past and future. The third objective is to avoid further categorizing and exoticizing of marginalized people in the process of celebrating that difference. I achieve these goals by using mundane materials, forms, and content and in the process remain authentic to my cultures, to my generation, and to myself.

By celebrating myself and juxtaposing beauty with struggle and oddity, I am legitimating that juxtaposition. By doing so, I am simultaneously critiquing masculine conceptual work.

There is dignity in recording the reality of the present, everyday, and mundane instead of focusing on nostalgia. I create art to celebrate mundane, current, everyday life. When referring to the past or future, you can pick and choose what you talk about and therefore romanticize it. The present is not glamorous because it is an actual representation of who you really are and you cannot hide from all of it. The present is unavoidable; it comes at you from all different directions. It is constantly bombarding you with different images, just as my work bombards the audience with different images. Thus, just as I cannot avoid my present, neither can the audience.

It is difficult to avoid categorizing and exoticizing marginalized people when you are trying to illustrate the beauty of their struggle. While my work is reminiscent

of Gauguin through the repetitious use of exotic brown women, it differs significantly from his work because I am not exploiting their physical beauty, but rather focusing on their inner strength. Furthermore by making those images of brown women all self-portraits, I'm taking responsibility for my depiction of a marginalized group.

For the same reason, I am careful not to categorize myself as an artist or attach myself to a genre or style simply because I fall into a certain category (i.e., woman, mother, American, Mexican, middle-class, wife, etc.), For example, the first comparison that is made to my work by a largely white middleclass audience is usually the work of Frida Kahlo. I feel that this is due to a lack of knowledge of Latina art. Although my work definitely resembles Kahlo's in color, and the use of personal narrative and self-portrait, these similarities exist in a lot of Latina work due to the bright colors present in our culture and crafts and the fact that most of our self-portraits are going to be of black-haired, brown-eyed dark-skin women because that is how many of us look. My work much more closely resembles the work of other Latina artists such as Marina Gutierrez, but Frida Kahlo unfortunately happens to be the Latina artist most people are most familiar with so they automatically make that comfortable comparison

That being stated, I am attempting, with my current work, to be as true to my unique experience as possible without letting stereotypes change the authenticity of my work. Also, I refuse to censor myself or be embarrassed about seeming too self-absorbed or wounded. It is through sharing our true experiences that we find a common ground and open up communication.

THE METHODS: AUTHENTIC MATERIAL, FORM, AND CONTENT

To achieve my objectives, I use materials typically labeled as mundane, everyday forms, and personal narrative content. These kinds of materials, forms, and content are effective because they are all true to me and my experience.

1. Authentic Material

Using “mundane” material is crucial to linking past to present, asserting my Mexican-American cultural identity, and acknowledging my childhood and the fact that I am a woman. In the art world, materials and techniques like quilting, fabric, watercolor, yarn craft, “pottery,” pastels, papier-mâché, wood, and other materials have been labeled as mundane, cliché, passé, child-like, over-used or purely functional or feminine and are often limited to association with community art fairs, functional crafts, feminist art, and the like. However, as a Mexican-American mixed-media female artist, product of lower or middleclass America, and the daughter of a woodworker, these very materials are essential to expressing my own truth and identity (and the identity of others) in highly narrative, personal work. This is due to their natural link with the everyday, their representation of female, middle class, and Mexican cultures, and their relationship to childhood and the past.

In using mundane, mixed media materials, it is very easy to simply replicate the methods, materials, and forms used by early feminist artists (such as Miriam Shapiro), as well as those of other minorities that have paved the way for us (like Faith Ringgold), in order to express issues of marginalization, alienation, and stereotyping. In my opinion, however, this kind of raw use of aprons, handkerchiefs, lace, linoleum, etc., is counterproductive to my objectives because it places all

women, minorities, and marginalized groups in the same little boxes rather than expressing our unique selves. Thus, instead of mundane, domestic materials and patterns being the statement of the piece, they are integrated into the piece, and become the background and texture for the work.

I still want to use materials that are pertinent to my gender and culture, such as yarn, lace, and other craft materials, but I am very wary of using any material that is not true to myself or to my generation, such as crochet, aprons or needlepoint. Those materials and crafts are foreign to me. Instead, I fully integrate only those materials and techniques that I am very comfortable and familiar with, like yarn, lace, watercolor, wreaths, wood, “God’s Eyes,” and macramé into one cohesive piece, just as the women of my generation live their lives. Instead of giving up having children and relationships to pursue an art career, as some women were forced to do in the past, we seek everything (facing some social stigma) – school, career, children, significant others – and integrate it all together.

The pattern (i.e., wall paper, patterned fabric, linoleum floors, etc.) has been the symbol for women's art since the Women’s Arts and Crafts Movement. In contrast, my womanhood is expressed through the urgency of material, the reaching for whatever is accessible, integrating everything, compiling it, borrowing bits and pieces, etc. In essence, a layered use of many different materials is now more a symbol of feminine issues that “the pattern.” The way that many women of my generation live their lives (and create artwork) is eclectic. We race about the house, the town, our lives, doing twenty things at once and assembling one identity from the fragments of many. I do the same in my art process by choosing repetition of objects,

colors, and symbols to express the “pattern” rather than using, for example, a sheet of manufactured wallpaper. Thus, I “break the pattern.” This represents the speed at which I live my life as well as the speed at which I am forced to create my art due to my personal obligations. I produce an enormous amount of work and am able to do so because of the repetition and rapid style I employ.

2. Form

I embrace my own obsessive-compulsive, overly anxious behavior by infusing it into my art production and research. Making lists, charts, and graphs of family, frantically recording memories before they disperse into space, and creating monuments to time is a diagram of the human self. In contemporary art these issues have been widely discussed with a conceptual style. Mary Kelly, for instance, mapped the relationship between herself and her infant son using a scientific background and being very careful to juxtapose the emotional with the clinical facts. I am allowing this work to be emotional while discussing the urgency and neurosis of being a mother. I contend that some of this work is almost purely narrative in its intent and execution but can become conceptualized once it has an audience. “Lists” and other obsessive behaviors therefore now manifest themselves in my work and have actually become the format for the work.

The forms I use actually become part of the work. By using traditional and decorative frames to present a piece, but then “breaking through” the frame and actually painting on it, adding to it, and altering it, the frame’s formality and structure are broken. A frame is restrictive, but I am attempting to use it to open up and break boundaries. The same happens when quilt-like grids are used to create a structure for

time, but are then dissected or painted through in some way. In addition, by hanging my work “salon style” I am referencing the past, when talking about a very current reality, thus breaking down the romance and formality of nostalgia as well.

3. Authentic Content

I allow my work to be extremely personal and narrative. This kind of work typically has been relegated to categories, such as “art therapy” and women’s arts and crafts. However, I contend that the more personal a work is, the more people it is actually able to reach because even if the artist’s story is not parallel to the viewer’s life, it still carries a familiar, honest, basically human tone for the viewer. Many times when students and other artists are struggling to convey deep meaning or content in their work, they employ traditional, seemingly universal symbols and contexts. For example, a trapped bird is often used to express an oppressed country. However, the perceived universality of this and similar symbols, in effect, deadens the emotional impact of the piece, limiting the depth and breadth of the message. The work I produce and my unique use of familiar symbols (and a few pop-culture images) is therefore very specific to me and to my own day-to-day experience of images, activities, and colors. That is not to say that the conceptual component of my work has been lost, but that it instead has been married to the narrative and, in fact, embraces and supports it. Thus, I am not ashamed of what I previously viewed as the overly self-involved component to my work, but feel it to be a vital way to communicate universal human concerns and ideas to the viewer. So, personal issues like helping a family member struggling with depression, feeling split between two cultures, and feeling strange and awkward in social situations inevitably creeps into

my work and the work becomes more complex than simply “feminist” or “multicultural.”

In addition, surface, tactility, and texture carry much of the narrative for the work. The fact that some images are eroding while others are getting covered with an almost-“patina,” illustrates the simultaneous openness and then withdrawal and ambivalence of many of my characters. The central female figure, a hypersensitive, passionate woman living among professional and cultural restraints, is something that is embraced in all these works. The materials I use dimensionally carry the power and energy of the narrative and the characters. The earthiness, repetition, layering, intense struggle and push-and-pull of material that is traced on the surface of the work go straight to the content of the work. This use of materials and forms addresses a rich, layered, time span, and an “anti-commodity” form of art. There is therefore a formal resolution to narrative content.

THE WORK:

Memory Tribute (with some measure of closure): naming the beautiful alive shames still haunting 2003

This first piece is a wall installation consisting of twelve of my own childhood paintings and one central “dresser” piece all mounted on a mustard yellow wall. This installation confronts us with the past still living and existing in the present as a real but distorted image. Originally I intended the piece to be a purging, letting go, relinquishing or even rejection of certain people but through the process of planning it, creating it, and working with each piece one on one, the installation became something else. Now it is simply a purging only of the shames attached to each

person and actually a celebration of each person, highlighting the beauty, texture, and strength that those shames now bring to my life. Each of the twelve pieces also illuminates what I see as beautiful in each person. The childhood paintings are matted, framed, and behind glass. Everything behind the glass (childhood painting and matte) is left untouched. Everything in front of the glass (i.e., the glass, the frame, the outer edge of the frame, etc.) is fair game and is painted, added to, drilled into, altered, etc. The initials of the person or group of people that the piece represents are inscribed somewhere on it. I chose my childhood paintings that contained either animals or people. So, it is as if the animals or people are peeking out from behind what is in front of them on the glass, the frame, and the reality of the space. So, the outside becomes the present, altered, added-to interpretation of those people (or of those people in the past). What is underneath the glass always remains the same and will never change. However, it appears changed by paint, glue, objects, yarn, and other craft materials, from our outside vantage point. I used materials that I am comfortable with and that are authentic to my own experience, both past and present.

THE “DAILY OPERATION” SERIES:

The daily operation series, as a group, is about present reality. The overall title, form, and colors of all the pieces in this series were chosen because of the game “Operation.” I chose this pop-culture image because, though the game was created in 1965, it is an icon of my childhood and relates to how I feel now.

Daily Operation I: Stilt Walkers 2003

This piece is about my everyday life. It seems to be a steady, calm, and constant searching amidst an underlying struggle. This is illustrated not only by the

title and the stilts holding up the man (my husband) to be operated on, but also through the layered but simple blue background with the raised “aura” around the central pregnant figure (me) and the raw plywood peeking through the frame. This steady, calm searching is also illustrated through the tentative, but peaceful, way the central figure is placing various hats on her daughter’s (Amberlee’s) head. The weird little bird is the only thing that connects mother and daughter to the “operation man” (who exists in his own little raised rectangular platform) with a red line, but still all three figures are contained in the same framework. This piece is my attempt to express beauty through pain, through coping, through togetherness, a wife’s marginalization from a struggling husband, her obligations to him, and the strong bond between mother and daughter.

Daily Operation II: List of Either Ailments or Strengths, with Family Chart

2003

This piece is about how each member of my immediate and extended family connects to my physical reality, strengths and weaknesses, pressure, pains in chest, “super-woman powers,” etc.

Daily Operation III: Obligatory Watercolor and Family Trinity 2003

It was important to me to create at least one exclusively watercolor piece, traditionally matted and framed, in order to acknowledge the traditional roots of my artistic training, which began in watercolor at age five. It was also important to me to create at least one trinity relating to my family to also acknowledge my Mexican heritage and that culture’s Catholic Roots. This piece is a triptych of three watercolor paintings under glass, all with yellow mattes and red frames (again borrowing their

color system from the game “Operation”). The horizontal frames are suspended one on top of the other by brass hooks and eyes and each bears a brass plate reading “*padre*,” “*hijo*” or “*espíritu santo*.”

This triptych contains reference to Gauguin through composition, color, religious references, and a multitude of “brown women,” thus accessing the exotic and the romanticized and marginalized ethnic, while critiquing Gauguin’s exploitation of their physical beauty by focusing instead on their everyday lives. I reference Gauguin in my work, also as a critique of my own early misconceptions of what is beautiful. He was my favorite artist as a child because of his focus on women of color and the beautiful way he depicted them. I did not understand, at the time, his sexual exploitation of social and cultural simplification of these women. So, now I address this issue with reinterpretations of his repetitive use of brown women.

This triptych, however, really focuses on the family trinity and family dynamics and a family functioning and existing in a beautiful, strong, dysfunctional way.

The frame of the center watercolor painting has a brass plate bearing the word “*hijo*.” Twelve female apostles (all the mother) wearing bird hats watch the “*hijo*” (who is a little girl vacuuming and wearing a superman suit). This is a portrait of my own daughter, illustrating her strength and uniqueness; she is “cleaning up”.

The top painting bearing the name “*Espíritu Santo*” depicts my husband Jon and again references the game “Operation” with a bird pointing to the central male figure with a red arrow. This portrait portrays my husband as an image or phantom because of the brass title bearing the words “*Espíritu Santo*” even though he is ever

present. The four women (all his wife; me, and representing the four directions) are whispering about him, holding a hand up to him, or pointing at him.

The painting on the bottom with the brass title bearing the word “*padre*” is more nebulous. You are not sure if “*padre*” refers to the mother and father figures on the sides or rather the central child figure bearing a crown and wearing a red jogging suit. Hats are used to mark each person’s role. The male parent and the daughter are wearing crowns, while the female parent is again wearing her bird hat. In many of my paintings you are not sure whether the bird represents a free spirit or a victim, a healer or a trickster-maybe it is both.

Daily Operation IV: ¿Señora Santana, porque llora la niña? Por una manzana que se le ha perdido. Vamos a la huerta. Cortaremos dos; una para la niña, y otra para Dios. 2003

The title is the song my mother sang to me before bed each night when I was a child and the whole song is painted in red on the old rustic frame of this piece. It translates as follows:

Spanish Song

*¿Señora Santana,
porque llora la niña?
Por una manzana
que se le ha perdido.
Vamos a la huerta.
Cortaremos dos;
una para la niña,
y otra para Dios.*

My English Translation

Mrs. Saint,
Why does the little girl cry?
For an apple
which she has lost.
Let’s go to the orchard.
Let’s cut two;
one for the little girl,
and the other for God.

This song transforms into my painting and my present day life to discuss my everyday sorrows, my own loss of hope, and my daughter’s rebirth of that hope. The

painting illustrates that my daughter is ending the cycle of victims and starting her own new cycle of hope, receiving the once lost apple.

Daily Operation V: *Padres, Hijos, Espiritu Santo* 2003

This piece is simple and direct and the material carries the message more than a heavy use of symbolism, as in the other paintings. This piece is another trinity relating to my family. I am not present in this piece. The language of Daily Operation V: *Padres, Hijos, Espiritu Santo* is almost literal; *padres*= my parents, *hijos*=my children, *espíritu santo*=my husband Jon (but literally, “holy ghost”). This message of this piece is not only carried in the text but in the texture of the piece. The wreaths are activated with color so that they become raw nerve-endings exposed and then subsiding.

Daily Operation VI: The 24-Hour Beautiful Fear Quilt (“*La Lotería*”) 2003

This piece consists of 24 paper-wrapped tiles creating a quilt-like grid. Each tile is marked with the hour of the day and has a pencil drawing of the activity occurring at that time. A “Holly Hobbie” quilt bearing the same pattern as my childhood wallpaper surrounds the grid. One of the images on the quilt has a text bubble above her head with nothing but a red circle inside it, just as in every panel the female character (me) is thinking of the same red dot. The whole thing is framed with an old, plain, gold frame. This work is an hourly record of the obsessive fear-filled thoughts I carry with me all day long. The central character moves through her day, from tile to tile, with the fear always present, but keeps on moving, peacefully, with her daughter.

CONCLUSION:

By using mundane and domestic material, everyday forms, highly personal content to create narrative pieces of art that address issues of feminism, multiculturalism, childhood, wife-hood, and motherhood, I simultaneously reject contemporary artistic notions of “worthiness” and “exoticness” and embrace the everyday rhythms of life as the primary means through which we construct and reconstruct ourselves and our relationships with others. It is this very “mundaneness” that makes my work broadly applicable. My pieces, therefore, contribute to the art world and beyond in that they reach out to underrepresented and often neglected areas of art, such as feminism, multiculturalism, and the connection to one’s childhood and past, in new and different ways.

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