

PROFESSIONAL WIDOW

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Problem in Lieu of Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2004

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McKinley, Katherine L., *Professional Widow*. Master of Fine Arts (Sculpture), May 2004, 20 pp., 3 figures.

The focus of my graduate work was to figure my way through a variety of challenges and transitions I was going through as a graduate student and simply as a person finding my way through my education to discover who I am and who I want to become. Perhaps my themes didn't focus primarily on these events in a literal sense, but I think the transitions in my artwork have become obvious through my time spent at UNT and the variations on a theme I have dealt with. All of my work deals with love, attraction, repulsion and the consequences we deal with as human beings when we make choices according to whom we choose to have relations with. It became very important for me to deal with these issues in an effort to discover what my expectations of myself as an artist and a person are.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I have always enjoyed the glitz and glimmer of Las Vegas nightlife and the extravagant costumes associated with the overdone shows there. I can't say that I've been in Las Vegas or other cities of the same or similar make, but for some reason all the overdone frills and masquerading associated with any form of entertainment or fantasy showcase have absolutely thrilled me. It's a simply human response, really. We as humans notice shiny, glittery things first and foremost. It grabs and demands attention.

When I started my first year into Graduate School at UNT, I began with my basic knowledge of how to get a viewer's attention. The most obvious way, of course, is to show something shocking, brightly colored, and controversial. My first major piece "Ultra Femme" consisted of 33 15" x 3" penis lollipops made from 40 lbs sugar. Each one was a different color with a cellophane rapper, lace edging, colorful, sweeping ribbons, and glitter. Each piece has a different large sized valentine's conversation heart glued prominently on the front of the piece in the center of a large bow of satin ribbon. I intended this work to remain both extremely feminine in the aspects of the bows and the colors used, as well as extremely masculine in the size of the penis and the large hand offering it to the onlooker. The conversation heart provides an interesting twist as the viewer reads each one. Such things as 'I do', 'smile', 'love forever' and 'kiss me' are imprinted on the conversation hearts giving the normally hazy meanings of these

candies an entirely new, ridiculously obvious and physical perspective. This piece began my studies into the world of embellishment and alternative sculptural media.

From the piece “Ultra Femme,” my work continued to grow into more outrageous displays of overdone fashion sense and décor for each sculpture installation I completed. As the glitz and frills became more numerous and blinding, the concept became further pushed and more personal; relating specifically to attraction, desire and the pitfalls of romance with the inclusion of something forbidden or bittersweet, such as cakes or candy.

By the completion of my second year in graduate school, the scraping for personal and often painful experiences to divulge into my artwork, even though the work I was producing remains extremely powerful, it had exhausted me. I considered a new route for my work to take, while still dealing with similar subject matter.

I began by taking the themes I was working with and treating them as a more aesthetic image, concerning color, placement, shape and the other design principles. It became less about specific experiences and more about color and distortion of a specific feeling in combination with the more playful side of the ideas I had worked on previously concerning the body and adornment. I began working less from my own repertoire, and more from common knowledge about lust, desire and romance and the connection I had formed with this and sweet foods, such as desserts. When I began thinking about the work I wanted to

complete for my thesis exhibition, I decided to focus on the ideas centering on physical attraction, manipulation and desire by placing it in a more whimsical format.

Statement of Problem:

The icon of the fish hook in my work deals primarily with the idea of physically ensnaring another human being via human attraction. It also deals with other obvious physical associations relating to the actual shape and usage of the fishhook itself. I intend to use the fishhook to represent not only a form of sexual attraction or 'hooking' another person through visual sexual attraction, but to also include the idea of mental addiction through human attraction and heartache. The fishhook is a powerful symbol as well as a simple tool. I intend to portray both of these themes in the sculptures I create for my thesis show.

Through researching the psychological phenomenon of desire and attraction, I intend to involve the audience in an at-a-glance kitsch and somewhat campy rendition of such situations where sexual attraction and the results of human desire are placed on a physical and metaphorical level. I intend to create 3 sculptures; each an installation of some sort. Each will utilize the fishhook as a symbol denoting attraction, seduction, heartache and various other emotions associated with human attraction.

Some Questions I intend to answer are:

1. Does the fishhook work aesthetically as a symbol depicting the themes of attraction I wish to portray?
2. Does the fishhook work as both a serious icon as well as a humorous one, or does it simply evoke one emotion from the audience?
3. Does the fishhook symbol work as a versatile instrument in relation to the themes I am working with?

Methodology:

I propose to create an installation of work in various mediums, primarily fabric, plaster, and other supports to create several sculptures relating to the idea of the fishhook as a symbol relating to attraction and repulsion in association with lust as well as the phenomenon known as love; or more specifically, human attraction. I will also keep a journal during this time and write a thesis paper on the subject in anticipation of my MFA.

CHAPTER II

DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION OF THE ARTWORK

For my thesis exhibition I created 3 installation sculptures referencing the concepts I am interested in concerning the human psychological response to desire and physical attraction including the use of the fishhook in each as a common denominator and in some as a focal point.

In an effort to answer the questions presented in Chapter One, the three installation sculptures I have created for my thesis exhibition will be analyzed. These three pieces are 'Hook, Line and Sinker (Booby Trap),' 'Heartstrings,' and 'Hook, Line and Sinker (The Big Catch).' I will give an initial, brief description of each to begin.

'Hook, Line and Sinker (Booby Trap)' remains the first installation sculpture I created referencing the fishhook imagery and dealing with the very prominent themes of attraction, desire and manipulation in reference to a psychological romance. I began this piece with the initial ideas of a burlesque show or a modern day strip club. The piece consists of 15 white plaster breasts applied to a white wall the appearance of which suggests that the breasts are emerging from it. Adorned with its own specific stylized pasty, each breast presents an enticing, glittery item on showcase for the viewer. No single pasty is the same; each has its own theme behind the design of the adornment. The use of common materials remains similar in each separate piece of the installation,

such as sequins, feathers, lace and of course the poignant part of the sculpture, the fishhook dangling from the tip of the pasty on each breast.

The second installation in the series created for my thesis exhibition is 'Hearstrings,' a piece taking up a large amount of space and considerable amount of time to hang. Comprised of over 100 small hand sewn and stuffed heart pillows hanging from the ceiling at different levels with spray painted pink large fishhooks stuck through the pillows themselves, and a vast assortment of unhooked hearts scattered on the floor beneath the installation, 'Heartstrings' provides a visually stimulating piece as well as an accurate portrayal of the themes I am in pursuit of.

'Hook, Line and Sinker; The Big Catch,' remains the third and final piece in the series developed for my thesis exhibition. This piece is comprised of 7 gluteal human anatomical body parts molded in white plaster and again, similar to many previous installations completed, the rears end up mounted onto a white wall so they appear to emerge from the setting. The theme here has developed in the same manner. However, this piece becomes a turning point and extremely different from the previous pieces in a very poignant way. Instead of having the buttox as a placeholder for the thong, the rear end is installed on a wall extremely plainly without any adornment, and on the opposite wall hangs an array of photographs displaying the actual thong worn by a living model. Each thong remains reminiscent of one worn in the days of Burlesque Shows through the amount of frills and feathers exploding from the piece. Each piece has its own

theme similar to the initial 'H, L &S' where some are entirely devoted to feathers and glitter, some appear to represent a fairy tale complete with green moss and iridescent butterflies perched on snaky branches , a puffy transparent pink tulle with several sparkling rhinestones, and each is adorned within it's embellishment an implement similar to a fishing line or one of those monstrous fishes with the dangling glowing snare in front.

In accordance with the analyzation of my work for my thesis exhibition, I would like to answer the questions I have presented in Chapter One. Does the fishhook work aesthetically as a symbol depicting the themes of attraction I wish to portray?

'Hook, Line and Sinker (Booby Trap)' depicts the idea of a woman's use of attraction to attract and 'hook' something, whether the goal remains the attention of a man, woman or perhaps the illusion of such to acquire a material gain such as money or objects. I believe without the fishhook the piece itself would remain relatively interesting but the point of the piece would remain lost on the viewer. The idea of attraction is obvious in the piece itself without any help from the not so obvious inclusion of the fishhook; the audience becomes attracted to the piece simply due to its bright colors, glittery materials and the fact that the objects themselves are breasts, a taboo subject that automatically draws attention. As a direct response from human attraction and desire the viewer becomes drawn to the piece simply because of the forms and the visual stimulation they incur.

The inclusion of the fishhook onto the form of the breast and the tip of the pasty creates a twist for the viewer making it far less of an obvious punch line. Why does this object have something so painful hanging demurely from the tip of it? The idea of sucking, touching or playing with these tantalizing objects becomes immediately out of the question. However, the idea also remains that the fishhook itself is hidden amongst feathers and glitter; the pasty itself acts as a sort of fishing lure. The breast and pasty attract the viewer and upon closer inspection under circumstances where the pasty itself is not technically being used for the audience to touch, it becomes realized that this object could be incredibly deceptive and manipulative in the right environment where the hook were not so obvious; such as a burlesque show or a strip club.

I believe that this piece fulfills precisely the themes I wish to portray in accordance with attraction and manipulation. It successfully attracts an audience, manipulating them into the belief that there is a tantalizing object there only to realize up on closer inspection when it is too late, that the glittering object is merely a ploy to attract unsuspecting passersby.

The second piece in the series I have created relating to the fishhook, 'Heartstrings,' I believe also works fairly well incorporating the fishhook as a symbol of attraction and manipulation. In this piece I wanted to give a sense of something already caught or on it's way to being caught by the hook. I believe it gives a very good sense aesthetically of the aspects I wish to depict due to the bright colors of the heart pillows, the variety of lengths at which the hearts hang

from the ceiling, and the variety of pillows untouched by the hooks lying on the floor beneath the hanging installation of hearts. In this piece, the hooks have already caught the hearts and the tension becomes increased through the movement of the hanging pillows on fishing line and the tears in the pillows from the violent incursion of the hooks into the fabric. The hearts have metaphorically already been attracted and manipulated by the pink spray painted hooks. The puffs on the floor beneath give a sense of impending doom due to their presence and close relation to the pillows already caught above.

In this instance the pink hooks work to give the viewer an idea of something that had not yet occurred in the previous piece 'Hook, Line and Sinker.' These hearts or individuals have already been attracted and manipulated. The puppeteer of the hooks that have caught the hearts remains unidentifiable, but the aesthetic idea of tension is undoubtedly clear.

The final piece in the series of work including the fishhook icon, 'Hook, Line and Sinker, The Big Catch' provides much of the same aesthetic information as the first 'Hook, Line and Sinker.' The viewer initially becomes attracted by the visual stimulation of a human anatomical part in the nude. On this account however, the situation is more abstracted and less obvious. This time the hook becomes further from the viewer's grasp. Not only is the hook hidden from the audience's immediate view, but it has also become intangible. The thong and fishhook itself are contained within a photograph as well as hidden in the fabric of the piece, making the embellishment of the thong that much more exciting to look

at and the hook that much more insidious and manipulative. The question this final piece incurs remains; does the hook itself stand as an aesthetically successful symbol of attraction and manipulation? I believe it does, but in a different way from the other pieces. Here, the fishhook almost becomes an afterthought, or more precisely, takes a backseat to the actual development of the individual thongs worn by the model and the bare, plaster buttocks growing from the wall adds a tension unseen in the other pieces. It begs the question of which one is the trap?

The second question I would like to address in relation to the 3 installations created for the thesis exhibition addresses the icon of the fishhook itself. Does the fishhook work as both a serious as well as a humorous one, or does it simply evoke one emotion from the audience or viewer?

'Hook, Line and Sinker (Booby Trap)' seems to draw viewers into the installation itself through the initial humor of the setting. The breast protruding from the wall with the outrageous pasty daintily tipping the nipple provides a humorous entry point into the sculpture from an aesthetic point of view. Upon the discovery of the fishing hook at a closer level to the installation provides both a humorous aspect as well as a serious one. The humor of the fishhook adorning a part of the female body both identified sexually and maternally is very surface and instantaneous. The serious depiction of the fishhook in this piece appears as something sublime, creeping up under the humorous aspect to hit the viewer a few moments after the initial reaction. Suggestion of manipulation,

physical pain, and mental anguish paint a picture of the fishhook on a much more macabre level to the audience. Certainly this well trusted icon seen as both sexual as well as maternal in society would not be associated with a physically painful form of manipulation. The reality of both mental anguish and physical attraction to such an object becomes pinpointed with the realization of the fishhook. The perfect ending to an attractive, promising wrapping occurs both comically and seriously with the pink fishhook dangling from the tip of the pastry.

‘Heartstrings,’ the second installation included in my thesis work discussion, also requires discussion into the question of whether the fishhook creates a humorous as well as a serious reaction from the audience. Upon initial inspection of the piece I believe it remains hard to discern whether the passerby feels one or more emotions. The first and most obvious aesthetic of ‘Heartstrings’ seems to fall on the installation as a whole. Each heart shaped pillow is fashioned out of a variation of pink fabric, in different hues and different patterns. Some of them have been crafted out of lavender or black patent leather, but the majority is of a warm pink. This aspect of the piece creates a whimsical, inviting atmosphere, however I believe at the same time that these colors remain associated with softness, comfort and love, the obvious fact of the pink fishhooks suspending the puffs forces the viewer to see this piece on a much deeper level. Whereas ‘Hook, Line and Sinker’ remains a very tongue-in-cheek piece due to the recognizable shapes and association with strip clubs and femininity, ‘Heartstrings’ provides the audience with a much more abstract view

of the same theme. I feel the piece itself gives an immediate sense of whimsicality, somewhere between the realms of humor and fear. In resolution, I believe this piece offers the viewer more than simply one emotion in response to the experience of viewing it, however the total response due to the instance of the complete combination of the hooks and the heart pillows does not come merely from one object or the other; it remains a combination of the two.

The third and final piece I wish to discuss the idea of the reaction of the viewer to the fishhook icon remains 'Hook, Line and Sinker; The Big Catch.' In this piece, the reaction of the viewer seems similar to that of the first 'Hook, Line and Sinker,' however the second piece came much later to me and seems to me to push this idea of viewer and reaction to another level. Although the initial image of women's rear ends sticking to a wall seems rather humorous and the photographs of the overdone thongs on a live model are equally amusing; there is an underlying thought of deeper manipulation here. Not only is the viewer less sure of what is going on, but the bare white 3D installation paired with the overdone photographs creates a tension that leaves the audience perhaps a little uneasy.

The third and final question I would like to analyze in reference to the pieces I have constructed for my thesis exhibition involves reference to the fishhook as a versatile instrument in relation to the themes I am working with. Does the fishhook work in this aspect? Does it remain an icon that functions in many aspects to accommodate the concepts I wish to exhibit in these 3

installations? The fishhook works as an image of ensnarement, manipulation, despondency or perhaps the excitement of the sport of fishing, the anticipation of the catch depending on what side of the line the viewer sees the piece from.

In the 'Hook, Line and Sinker (Booby Trap),' the fishhook plays an extremely important role. It simply provides the punch line to the piece. After all, the piece is intended as a 'booby trap' and entraps the viewer or whoever the manipulated may be 'hook, line and sinker.' The piece itself relates wholly to the fishhook and the concepts that the icon entails. The concepts presented rely entirely on the place the viewer takes; the manipulated or the manipulator.

In 'Heartstrings,' the fishhook again plays a major role in the themes presented in the piece. And again, the themes I am chasing are much the same as the themes I attempted to portray in 'Hook, Line and Sinker (Booby Trap).' For the most part, however I believe the piece depicts more of the part of the manipulated and anguished individual. The fishhook here works well to highlight those themes I am attempting to portray of heartache, anxiety and the depiction of a 'leap of faith' one would feel in relation to love and romance.

The third installation 'Hook, Line and Sinker; the Big Catch,' includes the fishhook as a much subtler device. The whole piece itself presents themes that are deeper, much harder to find than the initial two liners that the first 'Hook, Line and Sinker' provides. I'm not even sure if the fishhook is necessary in this last piece. It seems as though one half of the installation or the other works well enough as a device of attraction. The 2 dimensional photographs confronted

with the bone-white gluteal muscles on the opposing wall suggest a manipulation and an eeriness the other pieces lack. The hook is very hidden in the photographs, it's something the viewer almost has to look for to know it's there and for that reason I almost think it may be unnecessary. It feels to me as though this piece is a sequential end to the triad. There is a recognizably human figure within a picture frame; trapped. The plaster casts incite a similar feel. Only part of the body is there, and it obviously isn't the living flesh. Somehow, there is a paradox playing on the idea of manipulation in this piece. It refers in a way to the idea of a fairy tale land where someone is lured away and entrapped in a different dimension for centuries with only a sense of living proof left behind. Although this piece doesn't present the fishhook in an obvious format, I believe the ideas of manipulation, attraction and desire are finalized here and work well as a concluding piece.

CHAPTER III: CONCLUSION

Rich in pinks, velvets, glitters and large a quantity of varying fabrics, my studio contains a vast amount of test-drives towards an advent of human psychology such as attraction or desire. These ‘lump words’ as I like to call them refer to human attraction, repulsion, mental addiction, and most importantly the relationships between human beings that classify as the phenomenon of love. I began this work my first semester in graduate school dealing with recognizable shapes and colors demanding attention, primarily molded body parts and vibrant eye catching colors that took up a large amount of space.

The sculpture ‘Ultra Femme’ remains as an example of this phase in my work. The piece takes up approximately 15 feet of wall space; composed of 15 fifteen-inch hard candy penises held expectantly by a large, meaty hand of white plaster mounted on the wall. Each piece has a covering of cellophane with lace and multi-colored ribbons adorning the bottom of the lollipop phallus.

As I began a new area of my work, it began to deal more with the love, attraction and desire aspect of the human psyche instead of the actual physical attraction demanded between human beings. I created a large amount of work in this period of time in my graduate career, dealing with several aspects of the human emotion of love and its psychological effects. I researched several books on love addiction, sex addiction, and relationship therapy. In this body of work, the conceptual aspect had taken precedence over the aesthetic appearance. During this period of time and work I discovered working with pure

concept seems to create an overall aesthetic with an extremely powerful effect on its audience.

Rich reds, deep purples, bright white lace, luxuriant velvets and an addition of decay with rusts, burnt edges and melted chocolates or icings added to feelings I wished to describe in relation to heartache, attraction and desire.

The most powerful piece in this phase of my work entitled 'Happiness is a Box of Chocolates' takes up approximately 12 feet of wall space horizontally and 5 feet vertically. Composed of 8 valentine's candy boxes mounted with the top on the wall and the bottom half on the floor with extensive amounts of chocolate oozing from the box top down the wall to the bottom half on the floor, the piece seems to give a sense of longing, heartbreak and bittersweet memoirs. Each box references a certain relationship in the past directly dealing with attraction and desire and therefore directly referencing a different person in my history of romances. Because of this individuality I have given the boxes, each is decorated in a way relating to that specific relationship and person and singed with a blowtorch according to the amount of psychological remorse or nostalgia I felt towards the experience. The boxes are further personalized by a nickname I have assigned in melted chocolate beneath each box top which slides down the wall towards the bottom of the box where my written feelings on each individual are poured out into an empty candy box bottom.

As I completed the work relating to the bittersweet, personalized emotions involved in attraction between people, using my own experiences as a basis, I

began to feel an enormous amount of psychological exhaustion from this 'scraping of the soul' as I put it. My work needed to incorporate these ideas without the personal drain accompanying it. I began working with the themes of attraction, restraint, desire and all the emotions incorporated with human relationships in a more distanced and extremely campy way, using the same amount of colors, glitz and sensory overload used previously in my work, but applied an unexpected humorous twist with the addition of an object or tool commonly associated with sportsmanship which delves into an area of concept and symbolism I had considered before, but had not presented in this format. The fishhook became a new way to express my concepts on these human emotions I had been researching in a multidimensional and tongue-in-cheek way.



Figure 1: "The Big Catch" Photo (1 of 8) 13" x 19"



Figure 2: Detail of Heartstrings



Figure 3: "Hook, Line and Sinker (Booby Trap)"