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La Cotidiana

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LA COTIDIANA

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
Nancy Rogers Ehlers
May 2008

Accepted by:
Anderson Wrangle, Committee Chair
Sydney Cross
Andrea Feeser
ABSTRACT

My current work and supporting thesis explore the mysterious, the sacred and the day to day minutiae, “la cotidiana”. The overriding themes that fuel my work are found in the tenants of a form of Tibetan Buddhism, as well as from ideas stemming from psychoanalysis, as put forth by the French psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva; in particular, her approach to the abject, or that which we tend to reject on a personal level and/or as a society. In my thesis I will address these themes and how they are evidenced in my work with the simple photogram. I will provide examples of artists who have directly influenced my thinking and work, as well as those who have done so more tangentially. Finally, I will examine the themes of expansiveness, pain, abjection, transcendence, and the ephemeral found within my current body of work and describe how specific pieces exemplify these themes. I will also describe the formal progression and development of my work.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my husband, Lee, to our son, Ambrose and to the memory of my Grandmother, Nancy Allen Ogden.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the very dedicated attention of my thesis committee members: Anderson Wrangle, Sydney Cross and Andrea Feeser. I believe I was put in the very best of hands as I finally brought this all to fruition. I thank each of you for your insight, guidance, and trust. Thank you to Toshi Ueshina and Sam Wang for getting me started well in graduate school. I wish to thank Mike Vatalaro and David Detrich for first allowing me to take a sabbatical from my graduate studies and for subsequently welcoming me back to complete my degree. I also wish to thank the entire current faculty for creating an environment that challenges, supports, and nurtures intelligent art making. Thank you to my father, mother and step-father for your unconditional and loving support always; to my sisters and brothers, and all other dear extended family and close friends. A heartfelt thanks to my mother-in-law and father-in-law for lovingly caring for my son this past year. Thank you to the original photo gang and to all the graduate and undergraduate students whose paths I have been lucky enough to cross and from whom I have learned so much. And, especially, thank you to Lee and Ambrose for creating the meaningful context in which I contemplate and experience the day to day.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

My work explores the mysterious, the sacred and the day to day minutiae, “la cotidiana”. I cull subject matter from materials found in and around my home, often while performing my daily round; experiencing life with my family and, in particular, the meaningful caretaking of my young son. From this vantage point, I launch into other conceptual realms where I explore themes such as spaciousness, pain, abjection, transcendence, decay, and the ephemeral. My pieces are created without a camera; rather, they are simple photograms, a method used first in the very early days of photography that are made by placing an object directly on light sensitive paper and exposing it. There is often much ambiguity in my work. It isn’t always easy to look at or decipher, but at the same time, it can be quite beautiful. On a personal level I have gained much from making these pieces. From looking long and hard at that which I am inclined to look away from or ignore, literally or metaphorically, I have discovered merit, beauty, and poignancy. In this practice, a kind of staying power, I have gone in, through, and beyond, rather than ignoring and moving away. I am interested in how the items chosen for the photograms react with the photo paper, and how time elapsing can be captured in unique, often unexpected ways on the photo paper, a simple metaphor for the unexpected and unpredictable in our lives. The final pieces often resemble drawings and speak very much to mark making, but I am firmly planted in the traditions of photography, which, at their core, address the unique and elusive nature of light. I invite my viewers to contemplate
the coexistence of seemingly disparate forces; how, for example, in the often mundane routine of the day to day, one can find an exquisitely vast world and be transformed.
CHAPTER TWO
A PEACEFUL MEETING OF BUDDHISM AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

The overriding themes that have fueled my work are found within tenants of Tibetan Buddhism as expressed by the Buddhist nun, Pema Choedroen, and at times where aspects of these ideas intersect with theories put forth by the French psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva. The particular form of Tibetan Buddhism I have been exploring is known as the lojong practice¹ and consists of two basic aspects: tonglen meditation and the teachings which are a set of slogans.² In brief, these two aspects of the practice encourage an existence in which one attempts to move closer to general and specific pain and unwanted aspects of life, including disquieting emotions, while at the same time being encouraged to share joy and pleasure with others. This practice runs counter to conventional wisdom which tends to encourage the opposite: to tend to push pain away as fast as we can and to grasp at pleasure, often furtively holding onto it and hoarding it, rather than sharing it, for fear of losing it.³

The French Psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva, in her theories regarding the abject as they pertain to personal and societal borders, addresses the first half of this Buddhist practice: that which we tend to reject. Kristeva defines the abject as “what disturbs identity, system, order….the in-between, the ambiguous…”⁴ She sets forth

¹ Choedroen, 6.
² Choedroen, 6.
³ Choedroen, 51.
⁴ Kristeva, 232.
psychoanalysis as a model for “an ethics that will embrace difference.” By accepting unconscious drives (or, “the other” within us), we can gain an acceptance of “the other” within our society. Kristeva describes the abject as what “modernity has learned to repress, dodge, fake.” Both she and Pema Choedroen, through her Buddhist practice, seek an alternative to this tendency to reject and suppress. Both view such behavior as inherently problematic and propose a healthier acceptance of these disquieting emotions, in order to ultimately live a more expansive existence rather than one with self-imposed limits.

In my art work I have been creating a visual representation of the above mentioned ideas and philosophies. With the day to day as a starting point I have created final pieces that transcend their original time and place of origin, while not eschewing it. Sometimes I begin with that which was literally discarded (festering kitchen leftovers, a reminder of pure waste due to lack of basic home management skills) and use these items as the beginning subject matter. At other times, I have caught myself in a tender place, feeling ill at ease, and I have intended to simply exist with these feelings, visually, rather than ignore them. Creating a visual piece of art work forced me to literally face these less-than-pleasant aspects in myself. In doing so, and in also remaining dedicated to my process, the photogram, I did, in fact, move beyond my own starting place. At once, my pieces ultimately moved beyond their source and I moved beyond my starting point. More often than not, the final pieces turned out to be quite beautiful. So, from the

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5 Kristeva, 227.
6 Kristeva, 227.
7 Kristeva, 243.
8 Choedroen, 100.
mundane and/or discarded and disquieting, sprang forth items of visual poignancy and merit; a visual representation of the aforementioned ideas set forth both in Buddhism and psychoanalysis.
CHAPTER THREE

LA COTIDIANA

I have explored many different ways of working during my time in graduate school, from traditional black and white, color, digital photography, to alternative methods, such as cyanotype; from the simple Holga, to a deliberate large format camera. In terms of subject matter, my earlier work reflected an anxiety stemming from the all too often fragmented nature of modern day existence, an overriding sense of being at loose ends and disconnected from the sacredness of life. We all have little time for one another or for our own growth and nurturance.

Along came motherhood for me and I was thrust into immediate and intense and sustained contact with a wholly dependent sentient being. Needless to say, I was unprepared for how this experience would transform me, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. Nor was I aware that it would have such an impact on how I would ultimately come to approach my art making.

Gradually, then suddenly, I realized that I could not both care for my son in the manner I had come to value, as well as complete the work necessary for graduate school. I could have turned the work of caring for him over to another person, but he was my responsibility, my work, if you will. It took me several years to feel he was ready for another’s care (his paternal grandmother) and that I could return to graduate school. But there was still the issue of resolving how I would work, what would be my work? I was, in a sense, starting over. I also had to find a way to incorporate my role as mother into my
work, or rather, to find a way to get my work done with my son near by, for though I could hand him over for several days a week, he often was with me, needed to be with me and/or I wanted to be with him. In other words, I had to find a way of balancing what I was comfortable with in terms of separation from him and in terms of including him in my work. This balance is different for each mother-child relationship and it changes regularly. Eventually, I found a meaningful way to work that embraced values important to me as a mother. I began to re-explore a process I had been introduced to when my son was still an infant. A friend of mine and former graduate school classmate at Clemson, Christina Anderson, had told me about a process which produced what Jerry Burchfield termed “Lumen Prints.” Lumens are essentially photograms that are exposed for long periods of time outdoors rather than in a dark room. After exposure they are placed in fixer, skipping the usual developer chemical. This atypical method of processing creates unusual colors in the photo paper. Often, due to the long exposures, the subject matter will appear three dimensional, seen from above and below. The results can be quite remarkable.

Jerry Burchfield used this process while exploring the Amazon in the 1990’s as a way to capture and record the flora and fauna he came across. After exposing his specimens, he returned home to the United States, where he fixed the images, often toning them as well. As I began my original work with photograms three years ago, I collected specimens from nature; usually leaves found on the many walks taken with my

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9 Anderson, 12.
10 Anderson, 11-13
11 Anderson, 12.
son during his early months. I was struck with the wide range of leaf structures from the same type of Oak tree, an example of the increased sensitization that came to me with motherhood.

I started my new series of photograms at home and processed them in my studio at Clemson. With time, I realized that all the materials I was using in my pieces came from the very specific place of my home and/or my yard. I had not planned this, but it seemed worth noting. I always recorded the activities that I partook in while the photograms were being exposed; grading, playing with my son, caring for him when ill, cooking, cleaning, researching, running errands, working in my studio at Clemson, etc. This became a means of documenting the passage of time. I came to re-examine my notion of “studio time”, to expand upon it. It came to include time at home where I exposed these pieces as well as time spent in my literal studio at Clemson.

Initially, I was very fixated on how and when I was making these photograms; how much time they took, what went on simultaneously, what they were made with. It was difficult for me to experience the finished pieces in any way disassociated from their source. I could not at first see how they were beginning to function on a level quite different from the spirit in which they were created. I was hyper-focused on the concern of getting my work done as a mother and on using objects found in the everyday. Eventually, though, I began to see that these pieces did work at levels beyond their source. Below I will discuss some of these themes in my work.
Expansiveness

The Infinity pieces (see Appendix, figures 1 and 2) were created while repotting window boxes with my son. We conducted this activity directly on a large sheet of photographic paper. I then left the paper and remains of soil out in the sun to expose further. What resulted were celestial-like final images, enhanced by the eventual gold-toning of them. However, though they are atmospheric, there are also clear traces of soil, which began to remind me of the work of Anselm Kiefer and the textures in his paintings with soil. Conceptually, I was influenced by the ceramic artist, Tre Arenz, whose work involving everyday activities, strives to show merit and value in the daily ritual.12 My pieces are visual representations of taking the everyday and finding a sense of expansiveness within it.

Vexed

In the Vexed series, I used items that quite literally repulsed me; discarded leftovers, for example—the ultimate waste, an example of poor home management skills and a microcosm of all the waste we produce in the world; things left festering in the refrigerator, not unlike emotions left to fester, left unattended. I placed these items on the photo paper and left them outside to expose. Often, I placed the items randomly, though with an eye for composition within the seeming chaos (see Appendix, figures 3, 4, 5). Sometimes, though, I sculpted the material to form a shape or figure (see Appendix, 

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12 Dissanayake, 123-124.
figure 6). This practice related directly with the previously mentioned reading I was doing by Pema Choedroen: addressing the idea of beauty found in facing that which we would rather run from or ignore.\textsuperscript{13} Always, I was interested in how the various food juices reacted with the photo paper. Any liquid would begin the image producing procedure, but the final coloration varied greatly depending on what each food contained. The contemporary artist, Adam Fuss, works similarly. His work with various materials, including the viscera of rabbits, pertains in part with how various materials react chemically with photo paper.\textsuperscript{14} In Fuss’s working method, he will “set up experimental possibilities and then allow nature to run its course.”\textsuperscript{15} This is very much how I worked with this series in particular and with many of my other pieces as well. As stated in the introduction, I see this practice as a direct and simple metaphor for acceptance of the unexpected and unpredictable in our lives.

Nails

The rusted nails that I used in the Tibet pieces (see Appendix, figures 7, 8, 9) and in “Love is Kind” (see Appendix, figure 10) came from a pile of old wood in my back yard. It must have once been a shed that had long since met its demise. This pile was there when we bought our 60-year old house nearly two years ago. We should have made certain that it was removed before moving in, but we failed to do so. With a curious toddler playing in the yard, this situation was particularly dangerous. Finally, after we

\textsuperscript{13} Choedroen, 7.
\textsuperscript{14} Anderson, 11; Fuss, “Nature”
\textsuperscript{15} Fuss, “Nature”
had been in the house for over a year, my father-in-law came to help us dispose of the building materials. Instead of simply donning thick gloves and carrying the wood off in a trailer, he insisted that every nail be removed from the wood. He and my husband spent an entire Saturday removing hundreds of rusty nails from aged wood. In this very humble act, I felt that something quite profound was symbolically made right in the world. Instead of passing on the precarious situation that had been presented to us, this cycle was stopped. We hauled the wood off, but I saved the nails. Several months later I went to expose a random pile of the nails, but immediately saw that I could form a figure with them. I drew/sculpted the nails into a seated figure that resembled a mediating Buddha. It seemed fitting somehow to use nails—often associated with pain—with a peaceful Buddha, not unlike the symbolism of the nails used in the Crucifixion of Christ. In the process of creating this series of pieces, the violence against the Buddhist monks protesting in Tibet erupted making the violence-evoking nails seem even more fitting. I named these pieces in honor of the Tibetan people and all those—on all sides—in involved in the current, but long standing turmoil. These pieces deal with universal pain, as well as the tenuous nature of borders. I see these as in direct relation to Kristeva’s discussion of that which threatens our borders—personal or otherwise—as being abject.\textsuperscript{16}

The sculptor, John Bisbee, uses nails exclusively in his work. For him, the more limits he imposes with materials “the more expansive it all becomes.”\textsuperscript{17} In my work, I have taken the discarded nails and found great potential for vastness and expansiveness, too. In general, I did not limit myself in terms of materials, per se, but I did procure all of
\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Kristeva, 232.
\item[17] Bisbee
\end{footnotes}
my materials from a very limited place, my back yard. Instead of going in search of
images in the outdoors, at large, I remained within the confines of my home and found
images and/or material for imagery right before me. In doing so, I tapped into a powerful
sense of expansiveness.

Atonement

“Atonement” (see Appendix, figure 11) is a pivotal piece because it was the first
one I toned, thus altering the color further. It was the direct result of doing this that
helped me see and understand that my photograms function apart from the process of
when and how they were made. This piece is made from one of my nursing gowns.
Initially, I created it as a meditation on the complexity of the nursing experience (from
intensely fulfilling, to hopelessly sentimental, to painful and fraught with struggle). After
toning the piece, though, I immediately recognized it as dealing with pain, bruising, the
way in which we bruise ourselves, are bruised by others and/or life’s travails, and how
we do, or don’t, ultimately heal. It is alternately about resilience of the human spirit and
the inability to muster up the where with all to overcome life’s adversities.

Soon after making this piece, I began to forget what the initial subject matter of
my pieces was and to focus very little on what I was doing when they were being
exposed (though I still have notes with all of this information). At first these realizations
and conceptual departures alarmed me, but soon I came to accept that I had moved away
from my starting point. I was less wedded to their beginnings, though maintaining their
origins as important. In short, I had added another layer to them, or, finally begun to see that which had been there all along; that my pieces deal with pain, abjection, decay, spaciousness, transcendence, and the ephemeral.
CHAPTER FOUR
FURTHER INFLUENCE ON AND EVOLUTION OF MY WORK

Another important influence on my work is that of Susan Derges who is interested in capturing traces of phenomena occurring in nature.\textsuperscript{18} She is well known for her work of the River Taw, where she captures on photographic paper the flowing of the river water at night with the aid of a flashlight. In her exploration and practice she finds great interest in “surrendering to something outside of your control, so that you are actually flowing with it, not controlling it.”\textsuperscript{19} I began to set pieces of photo paper under water, covered by leaves and also to set them in snow to see what would evolve. I left a piece of photo paper underwater to freeze over night in order to capture an impression of ice. I left a piece out during the full moon and lunar eclipse in an attempt to capture nocturnal light. Though I could not predict the final outcome of this practice, I found it intensely fulfilling to purposefully disengage control and allow the materials to take their course.

Eventually, I began to draw directly on certain finished pieces when they seemed to call for it; either with conte crayon or when applying toner with a brush. I also “drew” with water during the initial exposure. This led to drawing with the actual material being used for the exposures. As noted earlier, seated figures seemed to appear when I first began to expose the rusted nails and so I sculpted them further. I also drew/sculpted with spaghetti in one of my “Vexed” pieces. This drawing with and/or on the materials marked

\textsuperscript{18} Anderson, 11.
\textsuperscript{19} Derges, “Rivers”
the beginning of a new phase in my work. It added a level of intentionality that was previously not as clear. It also represented a further recognition that the finished pieces had a presence of their own, somewhat independent from their source. On another level, this act of drawing on the photograms engaged me in the discourse that exists between photography, painting and drawing and the relationship of each to the other.

Another quizzical challenge for me was to accept my work as a photographer when, in fact, I was using no camera. It felt anachronistic to be working with the age old method of the photogram in the 21st century. I found few peers working as I was. But, again, I reconciled myself to this personal conflict. My work is very much about photography; I employ the use of light, photo materials, and deal with time’s passage. My pieces are also indexical. However, unlike most images captured with a camera, the index is present at the inception of the piece; in my case, while partaking in the daily round. I have also expanded the notion of what photography is. My work is most certainly photography based, but crosses over into areas very closely related to painting and drawing.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Beginning with the quotidian, I move into the conceptual realms of expansiveness, pain, abjection, transcendence, and the ephemeral. My work is both a meditation on the day to day as well as an exploration of that which can be found in unexpected places; grace, transcendence, and a feeling of connectedness. From a synthesis of ideas found in Tibetan Buddhism and aspects of Julia Kristeva’s work in psychoanalysis, I have found an overriding theme/context in which to place my work. My work is visual representation/interpretation/practice of these ideas. Through the use of a very simple photographic process, from embracing the day to day, and, very specifically, from the intensely meaningful experience of mothering, I have extended my study of what it is to be human and hope my viewer and reader will too.
APPENDIX

Images

figure 1: Infinity plus 19 (Window Box I)

figure 2: Infinity plus 19 (Window Box II)
APPENDIX

Images (cont.)

figure 3: Vexed

figure 4: Vexed (corn)
APPENDIX

Images (cont.)

figure 5: Vexed (lunchtime)

figure 6: Vexed (spaghetti)
APPENDIX

Images (cont.)

figure 7: Spring 2008 (Tibet I)

figure 8: Spring 2008 (Tibet II)
APPENDIX

Images (cont.)

figure 9: Spring 2008 (Tibet III)

figure 10: Love is Kind…
APPENDIX

Images (cont.)

figure 11: Atonement
REFERENCES


