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Mother Load

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MOTHER LOAD

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
Jeanine Cesaro Garrett
December 2008

Accepted by:
David Detrich, Committee Chair
Andrea Feeser
Christina Hung
Todd McDonald
ABSTRACT

In this body of work I interweave elements of the Catholic Rite of Reconciliation and that of the domestic realm to explore the tension between idealistic expectations within American culture and the imperfect realities of everyday life. I chose to create a sculptural installation for its unique ability to allow the audience to be immersed in its visual and conceptual questions. By drawing on my own experience of struggling to fulfill an ideal, the work should encourage my audience to consider the wide range of social tensions that they themselves are faced with.

My installation is deeply engaged in the symbols, materials and themes that derive from my exposure to Catholicism. I employ a highly patterned activity, either within the process of fabrication or the final product, to suggest to the viewer that the work is rooted in rituals.

The ambivalent state between anxiety and reassurance is a key component to the work. The structure and arrangement of elements in a seemingly unstable manner imbues the installation with a sense of anxiety that many people experience when trying to achieve societal expectations. However, at the same time beautiful and intimate forms ask the viewer to consider this as a sacred or other worldly location reassuring the viewer that the ideas are based in cultural myth.
DEDICATION

To Abby –

With all my love

To my family –

For your constant love and support
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would to thank my committee Dave Detrich, Andrea Feeser, Christina Hung, and Todd McDonald for their guidance and support in the completion of my thesis work. I would also like to acknowledge Robert Brownlow, Matt Rink, Claudia Dishon, Molly Morin, and Anderson Wrangle for taking time out of their busy schedules to share their knowledge and talents with me. I truly appreciate all the assistance.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Individuals today are presented with sets of ideals, norms and practices, largely presented through representations in the media, which generate standards of perfection that are often beyond our reach (Douglas, 4). In this body of work I interweave elements of the Catholic Rite of Reconciliation and that of the domestic realm to explore the tension between idealistic expectations within American culture and the imperfect realities of everyday life. Although I assume that this condition is not exclusively American, it is here that I have chosen to focus my research and the scope of this work. The concerns I express stem from my own struggle to navigate between the occupations of artist and mother. The demands of these vocations are high and the constant struggle to maintain an active role within both causes feelings of frustration, regret and guilt. I personally cannot live up to the images of the Super-Mom so widely broadcast in the media and now powerfully engrained in American ideology. The specificity of my concerns is a reflection of only one component of this pervasive conflict within our culture. Therefore, I draw on my own experience of struggling to fulfill an ideal, to create work that encourages my audience to consider the wide range of social tensions that they themselves are faced with.

As a result, I chose to create a sculptural installation for its unique ability to allow the audience to be actively engaged in the experience and immersed in its visual and conceptual questions. The ethereal atmosphere is dream-like to reinforce that the issues I address are myths that have been sanctioned into dominant ideology. The minimal aspect
of the installation provides a place for contemplation and reflection on the source of these myths and ideals.

My installation is deeply engaged in the symbols, materials and themes that derive from my exposure to Catholicism. I employ a highly patterned activity, either within the process of fabrication or the final product, to suggest to the viewer that the work is rooted in rituals. This action is one that has been used by artists, such as Monica Bock, to connect everyday activities to religious or spiritual practices.

The ambivalent state between anxiety and reassurance is a key component to the work. The structure and arrangement of elements in a seemingly unstable manner imbues the installation with a sense of anxiety that many people experience when trying to achieve societal expectations. This emotion is also in play in my choice to create an ethereal environment. Using only the color white, adding light and airy materials and constructing works that challenge gravity creates a sense of angst within the viewer through the works intangibility and tenuousness. This unease is even further increased by the limited access to the components that might some provide some relief. However, at the same time beautiful and intimate forms ask the viewer to consider this as a sacred or other worldly location reassuring the viewer that the ideas are based in cultural myth.

In the following paragraphs, the individual elements of the installation, titled Heal, Confess, and Fall will be discussed. Within separate chapters, I demonstrate the theoretical and conceptual basis for the work, an understanding of how process and materials function within the piece and an awareness of contemporary artists who have
served as an influence. By means of this arrangement, I consider the social, religious, and artistic connections that form the foundation of this work.
CHAPTER TWO
HEAL

In the work titled Heal, I consider how the Act of Reconciliation operates as a sacrament of healing for the wounded spirit (DeGidio). Since the bandage is a well-known aid in the healing process, I chose to utilize numerous Band-Aid boxes, the containers that hold the bandages, as a metaphor for the many wounds that are created by not meeting cultural ideals. As a result, the requisite need to be healed has become a fetishistic and compulsive act within our society. However, my choice to use a painted plaster replica of the actual boxes one might find in a home medicine cabinet suggests that the wounds created are largely imagined and the accoutrements of healing essentially unnecessary.

The Band-Aid boxes are placed tenuously on narrow shelves that traverse along front and sidewalls to further the anxiety elemental to this body of work. Empty sections on the shelves indicate some apparent activity or use. These small intimate objects situated in a linear fashion with periodic breaks might cause some viewers to draw a comparison to the Rosary. The barely visible crosses on the boxes conflate the iconographic symbol of the Christian cross with medical emergency reinforcing the notion that the obsessive manner in which we approach healing can be linked to anxious supplication.

The references to sacred, scientific, and domestic forms in this work align with the recent work of Monica Bock who often combines such components to draw upon her
own experiences as a parent. Bock’s work often includes repeated castings in metal and soap to reflect upon daily rituals or events that frame maternal life. According to Bock, she willingly exposes her nurturing skills to public scrutiny by openly relaying elements of her relationship with her children. Although conceptually we are both critiquing societal expectations and judgment, Bock’s work points specifically to her relationship with her children and her role as a mother whereas my work is more inclusive of other roles.
CHAPTER THREE
CONFESS

By not achieving the societal ideals that are presumed to be attainable, individuals are often left with feelings of remorse. Within the Catholic Church, confession is viewed as a means to relieve one’s guilt. Therefore at the center of the installation I placed a sheer white fabric replica of a confessional. The transparency of the confessional presented varies from the secluded confines of the stereotypical one and creates a semi-private/semi-public space. Layers of fabric hung from hooks references the domestic form of the curtain and the requisite confines of the home. The viewer has physical access to the interior of the work through two side entryways and although enveloped within this contained space, their presence is still visible to those outside the work, leaving them vulnerable and exposed. In the center of the work an inaccessible fabric chamber contains a rocking chair that rests precariously on a stepped platform recalling a cushioned church kneeler. The chair’s position within the work signifies the place usually held by the confessor. The broad back and swooping arms mimics the iconic gesture of Virgin Mary statuary. This gesture suggests a welcoming to the penitent “creating a hospitable environment of acceptance and love.” (Degidio) However, the denial of access to the kneelers, lack of privacy in the confessional, and missing confessor frustrates the possibility of relieving one’s guilt. I therefore give the viewer the choice to continue to carry the guilt or realize that the basis of it is unreal and invented.
I visually quote the work of Do Ho Suh’s fabric replicas of his homes in Korea and New York that serve as surrogates to assuage feelings of displacement and a longing for home. The ethereal, ghost-like quality of his facsimiles with their sagging domestic paraphernalia differs from the theatrical/stage set quality of my work. Whereas activity can be imagined but not function in Do Ho Suh’s presentations, I include actual elements for the activity to take place.
CHAPTER FOUR
FALL

Americans are constantly faced with feelings of inadequacy. By continually aspiring to unrealistic standards within various day-to-day roles, the odds of failure within some aspect of them are likely. The reconciliatory counterpart to this notion is the element referred to as Conversion. Within this element there is also the expectation of failure - that “the life of the average Christian would be this humiliating process of falling and rising and falling again – of sinning and continual conversion” (Wilhelm 314) The cyclical attempt of achieving such high standards, failing, then trying again, imitates the iconic Sisyphean task.

The ladder is the Christian symbol of the connection between the earthly and spiritual realms. However, the ladder in my installation is leaning precariously against a stack of pillows assuring that any attempt to ascend will result in a fall. As with the process of conversion the continual cycle of rising and falling can be imagined in this arrangement of objects. The size of the cradle and ladder is slightly distorted to suggest that it is not grounded in reality. Because my work considers how ideologies are born from myth the cradle metaphorically becomes the repository for these sanctioned ideals that are symbolically represented by the pillows.

Robert Gober serves as a source of inspiration for this part of installation. His artwork deals with themes of home, sexuality, religion and transcendence and is often expressed by transforming familiar objects of our everyday domestic lives into ones that
appear strange and irrational. Like Gober, I transform household items to bring the
viewer to a particular concept or idea. However, Gober’s extreme alteration of forms and
the elaborate quality of his installations differs from the minimal, ethereal quality that
defines my own composition.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the conceptual basis of the work serves as a critique of the images of perfection so pervasive in our culture. By employing elements of the domestic realm and those of reconciliation, which includes conversion, confession, and celebration, I explore the conflict of unrealistic expectations imposed upon individuals with the imperfect realities of everyday life. However, I have chosen to exclude the element of celebration in the work indicating that the viewer will not experience the full benefit of the sacrament. It is through this action that I intend my audience to consider that cultural ideals are often problematic and that reconciliation may not be possible unless we reject societal expectations as a measure of success.
IMAGES

1. Fall (Front View)

2. Fall (Side View)

3. Confess (Front View)

4. Confess (Detail)
5. Confess (Rear View)

6. Heal (Detail)
7. Heal (Detail)

7. Mother Load Installation (View Left)

8. Mother Load Installation (View Right)
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