12-2010

Experiencing Transition

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Experiencing Transition

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Fine Arts

by
Kara Leigh Renfro
December 2010

Accepted by:
Dave Detrich, Committee Chair
Sydney Cross
Anderson Wrangle
ABSTRACT

My sculpture offers visual cues and displayed experiences for the viewer to reflect upon past experiences and recognize the transitions that have occurred throughout their lives because of those memories or adventures that become important due to their fragile and brief nature. These transitions from one place to another shed light on our past and unfold a journey that leads us through the inevitably constant changing circumstances of everyday life.

The artifacts and documents displayed throughout this body of work speak to the human need to memorialize the past through collecting, documenting, and performing. It is through observing this process that one might begin to uncover parts of themselves that were once unknown. Through this recognition we discover the pattern of constant change, loss, and transition. Uncovering these past experiences has the potential to aid our knowledge in self-discovery and become a launching point to navigate the changing nature of life.

In order to create objects and images that recall memories and experiences I place myself in situations where I become physically present within the moment. The tactile nature of this process leads me to become a participant in reliving my own memories, or simply allowing myself to become cognizant of the fragility and brevity of a single moment. Implementing this method in my work gives me a better sensibility of object, place, and time when making final decisions about how to display the work before an audience.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this body of work to my late Grandparents, Dallas and Virginia Renfro. Though your presence could not accompany me on this journey, your life and love has inspired this body of work and the many memories that we shared.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work has been realized through guidance, keen observations, critical thought, and most importantly support that I have graciously received from faculty and peers in the Art Department at Clemson University. A special thanks to my advisor, Dave Detrich for our enriching conversations that have lead me to become a better artist and instructor. I would also like to acknowledge my committee, Dave Detrich, Syd Cross, and Anderson Wrangle. I appreciate the vested interest you have sustained in my work the last two and a half years and the time you have spent assisting in all aspects of my work.

To my peers; I have thoroughly enjoyed the talents, laughs, and friendships that each one of you has allowed me throughout this experience.

A special thanks to the following for their willingness to lend a helping hand throughout this process: Chris Pedersen, Anderson Wrangle, Christina Hung, and Ashley Ivey. The documentation of this work would not exist without your helping hands. Especially, Chris Pedersen for the many hours spent carrying the boat, videoing, and photographing. This work would not have been possible without your time and constant support.

To my family: For your unconditional love, prayers, and support. I thank your for allowing me wonderful opportunities throughout my life. The gratitude that I wish to express to you is overwhelming and I cannot thank you enough for all that you have done for me.

Thanks to God my creator, who’s steadfast love and ever-present guidance sustains me in all that I do. May my accomplishments be in his name and for his glory.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

My sculpture offers visual cues and displayed experiences for the viewer to reflect upon past experiences and recognize the transitions that have occurred throughout their lives because of those memories or adventures that become important due to their fragile and brief nature. These transitions from one place to another shed light on our past and unfold a journey that leads us through the inevitably constant changing circumstances of everyday life.

This work speaks to the human need to memorialize the past through collecting objects or documenting stories and experiences. It is my intention that these processes reveal to the viewer parts of themselves that were once unknown. Through this recognition we discover the pattern of constant change, loss, and transition. Uncovering these past experiences has the potential to aid our knowledge in self-discovery and become a launching point to navigate the changing nature of life.

In a book entitled “The Art of Memory” by Frances A. Yates he addresses the subject of the term mnemotechnics. He says, “The art of mnemotechnics seeks to memorize through a technique of impressing ‘places’ and ‘images’ on memory.” I recognize this definition as being a large part of what I am doing within this body of work. By bringing to light my own experiences, artifacts, and memories I hope to create spaces where the viewer might access their own sentimental memories of people, places, or experiences that inevitably shaped who they are.
In order to create objects and images that recall memories and experiences I place myself in situations where I become physically present within the moment. The tactile nature of this process leads me to become a participant in reliving my own memories, or simply allowing myself to become cognizant of the fragility and brevity of a single moment. Implementing this method in my work gives me a better sensibility of object, place, and time when making final decisions about how to display the work before an audience.

My works cycle through a specific process that allows me to memorialize the object as well as document the transformation of the object. By capturing transitional moments as they occur during the process of making, I am able to operate as an object maker, performer, and documentarian. These three modes are essential to my art making practice as it allows me to focus on the importance of the changes that occur within my own work as I seek to capture transitions that might allow the viewer to reflect upon the passage of time.

I make distinctions between these three modes of working by first drawing from my own collection of objects that access an element of my memory. From this point I chose to enact upon the object in an ethereal way. This gives a presence to the object that allows me to relive my own memories and experiences. This might happen through a performance or simply transforming the object from one material to another. Lastly, I chose to document this process in some of the pieces so the viewer can witness and experience the subject of transition and how it takes place throughout the work.
CHAPTER TWO
OBJECTS AND INTERIORS

In order to understand this process and its importance we must first start with the object and its placement. In my work the object and its placement become a metaphor for home. My work is often placed within an interior space or container where it is comfortably safe in its surroundings. I present the object and its context to be considered a stand in for our own homes and cultural backgrounds where we store sacred memories of people, places, objects, and moments, that as time passes, become valuable and sentimental. Throughout this body of work I use the unearthly state of floating to elevate a seemingly common object, to the ethereal. This presentation draws attention to the piece in a way that hopefully prompts an understanding as to the potential significance of the objects and the importance of memorializing or archiving. This context also has the ability to transform an object to an artifact.

My goal is to contextualize these artifacts in a way that asks the viewer to retrace their own memories that collectively create a sense of home, culture, and identity. In an essay by Haim Steinbach he says, “I devise a particular form or platform to memorize and memorialize the objects. There may be something ceremonial, of course, about building this shelf and presenting things on it thusly; the work refers to the way we give place to things at home or in the museum, the way we conceive, of furniture, choose certain styles, place certain objects on top, etc. There’s a ritual there, a “look here”
gesture, a history, a cultural tradition, a manner of speech. We follow the practice of building this kind of structure to communicate with objects.”

In *Green Glass* I use the pedestal to create an interior display for the green glass dish. This incasing refers to home. The stark white pedestal also speaks directly to the gallery and the way we display items of importance within a gallery setting. The clean lines and the stark white color are void of anything that could distract from the object itself. It has undergone a transition from antique store, to the domestic setting of the collector’s home, to the gallery space. This sets the stage for how I see the other transitions and transformations occurring within this body of work.
The piece entitled *Cupboard* is derived from the childhood experience of watching my Grandmother collect pressed glass dishes from various antique shops. In this piece the display of the large shelving unit places importance on each individual paper casting as the dividers serve as an interior housing and display for each object. The paper itself replaces the glass object to create a shell. The apparition like essence of these paper castings connects to the ethereal and resonate a sense of loss. These forms once impacted by a material of substance have been transformed into a fragile artifact that might seem to be deteriorating. The act of casting in its conventional materials of plaster, bronze, and other metals attempt to make something permanent. Casting the object in paper instills it with a sense of fragility. My aim in presenting the paper drape minus the object that formed it is to connote the instantaneous transition that occurs, which is fleeting.

The dish itself is a container or storage unit for a collection of objects that we value. Containers can be used to house the most precious items throughout our lives. They can be the most personal and intimate way that we archive the objects that become the greatest symbols of our experiences. Collecting multiples of these objects highlights a psychological element of human behavior that drives us to collect things that remind us of our past. Collecting multiples emphasizes our fascination with a single symbolic object. To many collectors a single item can become an obsession where any variation is
desired and certain patterns or themes are privileged more than another. This holds true in *Cupboard*, as two of the glass patterns are identical to the patterns that my Grandmother and I searched for when I was a child.

The shelving of the Cupboard is made of aged plywood. This casing provides the viewer with information that connects to an object of the past, as this type of aged plywood is seen often in antique stores throughout the South and Midwest. Pressed glass is also seen placed on shelving units such as this one in homes as well as antique stores. By placing the artifacts within this particular frame I hope to refer the viewer to sentimental objects that might exist within their own homes and pasts. I believe that commemorating these experiences can lead one to their own understanding of personal identity and cultural inheritance.

I use the artifacts in this piece, as well as the display, to archive these objects the way they exist within my memory, under a specific place and time. The vibrant colors of the glass in various greens, reds, pinks, and blues became a distinct part of the way I remember collecting and searching for these dishes with my Grandmother. The intensity of the red coloring sparks a vivid image, one that can draw attention to a specific place, time, or object that is clearly depicted through memory.

I find similarities in my work and the work of Rachel Whiteread. Much of my work exists within a frame, square, or interior. Many of Whiteread’s castings do the same as their basic form is usually seen as a minimalist cube. Whiteread’s castings of interior spaces tend to act as a way of creating an artifact from a particular time and place. My work seeks to do the same as I present objects that connect to time and transition. Rachel
Whiteread’s concrete castings imply permanence and strength. However, I attempt to change the object from its original state and transform it in a way that creates a delicate casting, one that is easily broken or torn.
CHAPTER FOUR

OBSERVING TRANSITIONS

In the performance piece entitled *Uncharted* I use the red shell of the boat as a metaphor for leaving behind our homes and what we know. Covered by a protective shell that incases our past we feel protected as though we are still under the care of an interior familiarity we know as home. In the performance I am seen leaving a dock in a red skinned boat wearing a matching wrap around red dress that cloaks the body. This portion of the performance takes place in the morning when there is a foggy mist that rises from the water, and as I row, I disappear. It is during this time that I begin to try and navigate my uncharted voyage through territory obstructed by the natural element of fog. Due to the unconventional materials of the boat (steel, plastic, and paper) I am confronted with the ever-present fear of sinking. In many ways I equate this feeling with the uncertainty of transition.

The last portion of the performance occurs during the evening and consist of a return voyage where the boat is seen in its original steel skeletal structure. The boat is completely exposed and still placed in a vulnerable state. I am seen wearing a grey-tiered dress that matches the sectioned structure of the vessel. Though the boat has been stripped of its red skin and remains vulnerable, it still manages to return. This time is makes landing on shore suggesting that it has found a place of rest. While this new place might not feel as protected as its home launching point it remains structurally sound and in its natural form as it makes landfall. During this performance we are taken step by
step through a transition that occurs within the life of a vessel and the person navigating it.

In the documentation of the performance, the boat, and myself are first seen in red and last in grey. This transition and significant color change is a representation of an idealized journey where everything is attainable and full life, youth, and hope for what lies ahead. During the return the boat is seen stripped of its red shell where the structure of the boat is exposed and my grey dress matches the color of the exposed steel frame. A transition has occurred. The unattainable nature of this idealized or over romanticized voyage is now an exposed reality, but because of this knowledge the boat and the navigator emit the color grey as a symbol of the wisdom that they gained throughout the journey.

The photographic documentation highlights the qualities of the overly romanticized voyage verses the return. The images were made at two separate times in order to convey the passage of time. The morning as a symbol for a fresh start and night as a symbol for the ending of day where lighting is dim and color starts to fade. Throughout these photographs the red boat is seen in the morning light with a foggy mist. This image depicts a sense of epic adventure, one that is often told in the form of a story. These photographs seek to highlight a sense of adventure as well as an idealized start to a hopeful uncharted voyage. The dusk photos depart from the saturated morning image. This image is meant to be less romanticized and more a depiction of the reality that the boat has returned to.
Through the object, the performance, and the documentation Uncharted seeks to present the viewer with an artifact or remnant of an experience. Much like Green Glass and Cupboard, the boat itself calls to mind a shell of an object that is suspended within a certain time and space. This aspect of the work might lead the viewer to question the importance of past experiences and how they become a reflection of sentimental moments that transform into sacred memories, or turning points in self-discovery.

Navigation plays a critical role in Uncharted as the performance moves at a slow pace. In my work I attempt to slow the transitions in order to privilege the passage of time as a way of absorbing and analyzing the present moment. I use contemplation as a vehicle to experience self-reflection for the viewer.

The transition that occurs within this piece also occurs within each piece exhibited. In Green Glass the object is transformed by its surrounding. In Cupboard the transition occurs when the casting is removed from the mother mold. And in Grandparents (Video) transition takes place as the resin fades from clear to white as the substance covers the photograph.

The work of Do–Ho–Suh specifically in The Korean House Project 1999 creates an environment for one to reflect upon what the object or space surrounding them might mean. In the same way I am using the interior of a box; whether it be small (like the pedestal) or large (like the large projections of the boat.) Do–Ho–Suh uses this interior space to express longing for his home in Korea. I use interiors to stage a specific emotional experience, one that can be linked to memory or experience and its ethereal and precious nature.
CHAPTER FIVE

OBJECT, PERFORMANCE, DOCUMENTATION

_Uncharted_ highlights three important processes that I consider critical to understanding this body of work. Previously, I mentioned that I consider myself to be an object maker, performer, and documentarian. All three of these play a significant role in how I convey the importance of transition throughout the work and in particular _Uncharted_.

The object itself is a 15-foot boat armature construction made of square mild steel. This armature allowed me to add and take away from the form itself. This technique was efficient because it allowed me to easily capture the changing of the form.

In _Uncharted_ I use performance as a means by which I document the work. I understand that in a typical performance piece the artist might conduct the performance with a beginning, an end, an audience, or a set of goals or criteria for accomplishing the mission of the performance. In _Uncharted_ my goal for accomplishing my mission with the performance was to simply document the launch and return of the boat. As the performer there was a large amount of uncertainty that went along with floating a metal boat-frame skinned in plastic and paper. This uncertainty or vulnerability is connected to how one might feel in a state of transition. As a performer in my own work it was important for me to experience this passing moment of uncertainty and document it so that the viewers within a gallery setting might access this experience through viewing an artifact, video footage, and photographic stills.
Documenting this work (or process) was the most important part of *Uncharted*.

By capturing video footage of the launch and return, as well as still images, I was able to capture many singular moments throughout the performance that captured and archived a fleeting experience. Though the performance could be carried out in front of a larger audience, I chose to document the process specifically for a gallery setting where I knew the piece would be the most widely viewed. This work can be accessed through physical presence and also through documentation, for this piece I do not privilege one over the other.
CHAPTER SIX
ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Artist such as Joseph Beuys and Marina Abramovic are examples of artist who have effectively displayed their work in a variety of forms for various types of viewing audiences. In the piece entitled *I like American and America Likes Me*, by Joseph Beuys, the artist carries out a performance where he is rushed from the airport, carried by an ambulance, to a gallery in New York where he attempts to reconcile with a coyote, as he and the animal live together in the gallery. In this piece Beuys finds himself in a compromising situation, one where he is subject to physical injury and pure uncertainty. In *Uncharted* I subject myself to the possibility of physically sinking in a structure that took months of thought and preparation in the making. Both activities are meant to evoke a moment of uncertainty and unfamiliarity.

The materials used in Joseph Beuys performance were a piece of felt, straw, leather-gloves, and a staff. These items have now been displayed in galleries all over the world as an existing artifact of the moment in time where Beuys carried out the performance. Suddenly, what was once an object used for the purpose of the performance has now been elevated to an iconic artifact or remnant of a performance.

Marina Abramovic employs similar technique in her performances. In her recent Retrospective at MOMA, NY she displays video footage of performances, photographic stills, clothing worn during performances, and even installations that were used in carrying out certain performances. While the content and subject matter of these two
artists differ from mine, I find similarities in the way I ultimately present the viewer with information. In my work the artifact, video, photographs, and installation offers the viewer an extensive insight to the overall piece, making the viewing, an experience in itself.

*Uncharted*, as a whole, portrays an overly romanticized and even an idealized scene of an ephemeral experience. This speaks to mnemotechnics, where the documentation serves as a catalyst for placing images, places, and events on the viewers memory in hopes that they too will be reminded of their own passing moments where the recognition of transition takes us from one point of our lives to the recognition of another.

In the video piece entitled *Grandparents* the video is seen as a split screen image where resin is poured over the image into a container. The container acts as a frame for the photograph. This particular glass container was purchased at an antique store giving it an aged look. The container is small and can easily be stored. It is reminiscent of a container where one might store small, intimate objects of sentimental value. This holds true in my case where the container becomes a storage device for, one of few, existing family portraits of my late Grandparents.

As resin is poured over the image it starts to harden and turns from clear liquid to solid white. As the resin hardens it gradually fades the image where the photograph is no longer visible. On the other side of the screen the process is being reversed from the end of the video to the beginning. The entirety of this process is reflective. The video moves at a slow pace as it is constantly changing. At a single point in the video the segments overlap and appear to be the same.
It is in this moment where the viewer has witness an unfolding of events that depict loss, transition, and the revealing of that process.
In conclusion I create artifacts, and documents from my own life experience and memories with the intention that my work will prompt the viewer to the recognition of these moments in life that are irreplaceable and exist within a delicate place in time. The artifacts and documents that comprise the work featured in this exhibit collectively undergo a process of change. Awareness of this change offers a passageway for us to reflect upon our individual pasts and gives us a heightened sensibility of the present moment and the transitions that delivered us here.
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2. *GreenGlass* (Detail)
3.  *GreenGlass* (Top View)
4. *Cupboard* (Front View)
5. *Cupboard* (Front View)
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7. *Uncharted* (Boat Launch) Digital Inkjet Prints

8. *Uncharted* (Boat Return) Digital Inkjet Prints
9. *Uncharted* (View Left)

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