Interweaving: Play, Craft, and Femininity

Glory Loflin
glorydayloflin@gmail.com

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INTERWEAVING: PLAY, CRAFT, FEMININITY

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
Glory Day Loflin
May 2023

Accepted by:
Professor Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
Professor Alex Schechter
Professor Anderson Wrangle
My thesis *Interweaving: Play, Craft, and Femininity* pulls from the visual language of Craft materials and practices to generate large-scale, often colorful works that reflect on my current understanding of being a woman in America. Raised in the conservative South, this body of work arose out of an attempt to understand the American political climate with respect to women’s bodies and where my artistic voice is present in that conversation. My research for my thesis exhibition began with an investigation into the matriarchal history of craft-based fiber practices in my family. Soon thereafter, I actively wove traditional Craft processes in wood, clay, and fiber into my painting practice, considering my conceptual education in painting and sculpture and trying to reconcile it with my lineage of Craft practices. This exhibition interweaves the themes of weaving as a metaphor for women’s history, the seriousness of play, monumentalizing the domestic, and weight of social tradition. As I pursued this body of work, the pieces in this exhibition began to evoke the tension I felt throughout its production between my desire to preserve and honor the traditions of making by the women in my family and the social and cultural histories interlaced with those materials that have been oppressive for women. This exhibition presents works addressing my value of material heritage and simultaneously considering the problems interwoven with that history.
DEDICATION

For the women in my family who have made me the woman I am: Prudence, Harriet, Cheri, Susan, Marti, Janet, Norma, and my sister Grace.
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INTRODUCTION

My thesis Interweaving: Play, Craft, and Femininity pulls from the visual language of Craft materials and practices to generate large-scale, often colorful works that reflect on my current understanding of being a woman in America. Raised in the conservative South, this body of work arose out of an attempt to understand the American political climate with respect to women’s bodies and where my artistic voice is present in that conversation. My research for my thesis exhibition began with an investigation into the matriarchal history of craft-based fiber practices in my family. Soon thereafter, I actively wove traditional Craft processes in wood, clay, and fiber into my painting practice, considering my conceptual education in painting and sculpture and trying to reconcile it with my lineage of Craft practices. This exhibition interweaves the themes of weaving as a metaphor for women’s history, the seriousness of play, monuments to the domestic, and the societal weight of tradition. As I pursued this body of work, the pieces in this exhibition began to evoke the tension I felt throughout its production between my desire to preserve and honor the traditions of making by the women in my family and the social and cultural histories interlaced with those materials that have been oppressive for women. This exhibition presents works addressing my value of material heritage and simultaneously considering the problems interwoven with that history.

Through the artworks presented here today, I will narrate the primary concepts that drove my studio practice while pursuing this body of work. While these themes are present in all of the work in Interweaving, I will highlight the theme most visible in each work I present.
CHAPTER ONE

WEAVING WITH WOOD

Through the lens of my grandmother’s craft practice in fiber, I have approached my own large-scale works. Starting with my wooden weavings, Bloodline (figure 1), and Tom Boy (figure 2), the most direct connections to my grandmother’s practice can be seen. These two large scale planar artworks either mounted to the wall and descending to the floor, or assembled side by side in a striated pattern that mimics the flow and flexibility of fabric, both imitate and reference the warp and weft familiar to weavers. These two works reflect on the transmission of tradition from generation to generation within my family through the material language of fiber. They also act as an extended metaphor for the female experience through the use of color and reference to women’s Craft labor.

Interweaving: Play, Craft, and Femininity developed through researching my grandmother’s fiber-practice and revisiting her labor through painting and sculpture. Prudence, or Pru for short, sewed, crocheted rugs, and quilted. She taught these fiber processes to her daughters and grand-daughters depending on their personal interests. As a middle-schooler, she invited me to her home in Columbia, SC to learn to sew. She helped me curate fabrics, buttons, and threads and patiently guided me through the process of working with paper patterns and a sewing machine. Later in middle-school at my home in Greenville, SC, I stood in front of the kitchen sink on a hand-braided and crocheted rag rug of Pru’s. It was round, multi-colored, and striated in patterning. Under my feet, it absorbed water splashed while washing dishes and beautified the otherwise dull, beige, linoleum floor. While researching Prudence and her fiber
practice, it became apparent to me that the maternal care she showed her family correlated with
the commitment to detail found in her artwork. The utilitarian nature of clothing garments,
rag”rugs, and blankets mirrored the comforting shoulder, nurturing support, and physical
embrace my grandmother gave me throughout my years with her. Her life as a mother and
teacher was directly reflected in the fiber work she made and its physical nature, be it scale,
texture, or form, was dependent on the person or persons under her care.

**Bloodline Weaving**

*Bloodline (figure 1)* is made of cut, sanded, and stained 2” x 4” s, as evidenced by their
machined width, to create a chromatic gradient of many interlocking wooden shapes. This
lumber, as well as the overall feeling of construction with visible methods of assemblage and
suspension and obvious joinery hardware, lends a sense of tension to the work that is in
juxtaposition to the highly expressive color, playful gesture, and bold scale that evokes a feeling
of curiosity and childlike wonderment. The saturated chromatic gradient present in the piece,
with a deep value purple at the top, vibrantly saturated red in the middle, and pale peach at the
bottom is one familiar to women whose bed sheets almost always have a portion of this gradient
on them somewhere in the form of a stain. This context of the mundane feminine experience
rarely spoken of socially is echoed through the action of staining the wood rather than painting it,
forming layers of meaning through the connection to the body and fiber practice.

**TomBoy Weaving**

*TomBoy (figure 2)*, while still referential of many of the same themes, takes a different
approach to the ideas of fiber and weaving than *Bloodline (figure 1)*. This piece centralizes on
the tension and fluidity of warp and weft during the weaving process. My wood weavings,
especially *TomBoy (figure 2)*, consider how my grandmother’s fiber practice is part of a long lineage of female artists who worked with materials like fiber and clay because they were gendered as female materials. This work is supported by Annie Albers’ experience who upon admittance to the Bauhaus was pushed into a weaving practice because she was a woman and the studies of architecture, painting, and sculpture were deemed not gender appropriate for her. Famously, Albers would go on to become one of the most influential textile artists in the 20th century clearing a way for many female fiber artists to follow in her footsteps. My own work, *TomBoy (figure 2)*, playfully draws on these histories of women forced into gendered molds by nodding to the current understanding of gendered colors pink and blue in the United States. While this gendered history of baby pink and blue is relatively recent as it developed in the mid 19th century, the metaphor of female identity as a weaving of many colored threads and punctuated with additional complementary colors conveys a more holistic understanding of femininity. This idea is furthered by the visual movement present within the work, breaking the rectilinear shapes traditional to woven objects.
The paintings that create the *Dress the Table* (figure 3) series utilize clean stenciled lines, flat spray paint, and simple geometries to create images of content familiar to my traditional feminine experience including objects from the domestic environment, florals, and knitting. Unlike traditional paintings that confront the viewer from the wall, these works confront the viewer through the surface of the domestic, the decorated tabletop reserved for tablecloths and doilies. This is a presentation of painting that is feminine rather than masculine, manipulating the viewer into an experience that casts them in the role of walking around the table the way a woman might dress the table.

In Katarzyna Zimma’s doctoral thesis *Play in the Theory and Practice of Art* she describes an early understanding of the term “play”:

The experience of play as we know it from childhood and everyday observation evokes the series of key phrases describing play as: joyful, non-serious, sometimes mysterious or irrational and opposed to the sphere of purposeful adult’s activities. However play can be also regarded as a functional cognitive tool- a way to make sense of the world.

Within my work, play as a term applies to my visual vocabulary as large-scale, vibrant colors, non-traditional presentation methods, multi-disciplinary material investment, and unexpected juxtapositions. Play allows me to manipulate hierarchical systems like treating the white wall gallery space as my playground, considering how the viewer's body is choreographed in space and how connections can be made between and among the works like props in a theater. This
methodology of play also plays upon an expectation of the viewer that the content of what is bright, bold, and colorful is not nuanced, articulate, and deeply thought provoking. Within my work is a hybrid experience of childlike expectation of play as related to the aesthetics of commercially manufactured toys meant for children and the unexpected critical reading of the work that speaks to more complicated content through scale and medium.

**Dress the Table**

*Dress the Table (figure 3)* is a series of fifteen modular painted panels situated atop sawhorses and arranged in a maze-like pattern between knee and hip height. The organization of the work mimics the experience of a maze, requiring the viewer to physically engage with the paintings in a manner that is not typical of traditional painting display. Set up like a game, this work references the way women's bodies currently serve as the plane upon which politicians play and simultaneously references the planes of women’s domestic labor through ‘dressing the table’ or ‘making the bed’. While this piece is set up like a maze to be played, it is importantly not functional as it does not lead to a single endpoint but rather continues to divert the viewer out and around the table-like surfaces. Referential of post modern artworks such as Gabriel Orozco’s *Ping Pond Table*, *Dress the Table (figure 3)* alludes to the new spaces for dialogue and understanding that can open up by playing a given game differently or simply changing the rules of game-play.

*Dress the Table (figure 3)*, in contrast to my wood weaving works, *Bloodline (figure 1)* and *Tom Boy (figure 2)*, focuses on the craft practice of quilting, another art process my grandmother was active in. My own quilting connection and reference is directly seen in the ratio of each 36” x 72” wooden panel as equivalent to two ‘quilting squares’ for each painting. The
artworks are also painted in a graphic, stylized manner that references appliqué quilting by repeated application of flat shapes of color. This is achieved through the process of many stenciled layers that, upon being spray painted, obviously sit on top of the underpainting. This quilter sensibility also lends itself to quoting the visual language of the male-dominated modernist movement. In MAI scholarly journal modernist aesthetic is discussed, “In the first half of the twentieth century, the tension between art and craft came to the fore as modernism ushered in an era of clean lines, unembellished surfaces, rationality, and simplicity (an aesthetic that was coded as masculine).” My work utilizes this male-coded visual language to talk about domestic experience and monumentalize the mundane in women’s day to day lives.

Between table top height and bed height, this work references the typical way women’s fiber artwork has been experienced throughout history. Displayed horizontally, this gesture of “laying out” content rather than commanding viewers’ attention through the traditional presentation of wall mounting, softens the experience of the work and generates more play in reading the work. Artist Judy Chicago utilizes many of these same conventions in her work, Dinner Party which, to quote the artist, narrates her female heroes through history. Within Dress the Table (figure 3) is an elevation of the materials of women’s domestic labor: organized and stacked dishes, women’s Craft labor through knitted and purled composition and yarn balls, and women’s girlhood experience through portraits and dandelion chain. Additionally the way the image “falls” over the side of the paintings references the way a tablecloth or bedspread drapes over the surface it is placed upon, conforming to the structural geometry. The underlying modularity relating to the grid, horizontal display, and image bleed onto the sides of the panels tighten the connection between my understanding of quilting as related to my painting practice.
and simultaneously makes room for play as a learning experience. In this way the seriousness of play is presented through the visual language of color, scale, and pattern, metaphorically through the relationship between the domestic sphere and the political sphere, hierarchically through the history of Craft as it relates to painting, and contextually as the work is both off the wall and displayed horizontally.
CHAPTER THREE

THE MONUMENTAL FEMININE

Moving away from craft traditions of making in fiber and towards clay as a material that alludes to the feminine, the next works I will discuss are my large ceramic female busts entitled *Glory Day* (figure 4) and *Sisters* (figure 5) which pull to the forefront of my work the theme of monuments to the domestic, in this case through the female form.

**Glory Day**

*Glory Day* (figure 4) is a self portrait featuring a large-scale, highly stylized, white, ceramic female bust situated atop a series of modular, gridded, white shelves with white vases and bowls. From a distance, the front of the bust has a traditional, idealistic beauty with clean contour lines and symmetrical organization of spherical, geometric volumes. Upon closer inspection, the surface of the sculpture is pocked with significant holes that mimic the porous nature of human skin at a large scale. The discongruity between the expectation of traditional beauty from a distance and the experience of the reality of pocked skin and blemishes up close mirrors a cultural expectation women experience on a day to day basis of bodily perfection that has little to do with their interior identities.

Organized onto clean, polished, white shelves, the sculpture *Glory Day* (figure 4) juxtaposes the porous, glazed ceramic surface of the bust with its white, glossy, pristine pedestal that creates a visual tension of textures. The base of the bust squarely fits on the rolling shelving units that support it, framing the head in the context of the utilitarian. Using a functional shelf whose sterile whiteness and utilitarian nature quote kitchen cabinetry, the literal supports of this
work frame the female figure in the kitchen, a place often relegated to the realm of women who are traditionally considered in charge of the domestic sphere. The utility of pedestal as shelving unit through the placement of bowls and vases on the interior surfaces of the pedestal, plays with white wall gallery expectations of pedestal as invisible support and purely platform of display. This work usurps traditional expectations of viewing sculpture by referencing traditional forms like bust and pedestal, and traditional materials like wood and clay, and presenting them through the language of the domestic like modular shelving, slick surfaces, and mobile carts.

Within my ceramic sculptures of female busts are quotations of a heavily stylized hand leaning toward abstraction through clean contours and geometrized nose, ears, and eyes. This visual language is exemplified by modernist artist Henry Moore in his work *Reclining Figure No. 4* as its organization of both spherical and rectilinear geometric volumes that along with a more organic, gestural line describes a lounging female figure. However, more similarly to the work of artist Viola Frey, this work is tied to monumentalizing the female form in order to narrate her experience while working within a stylized manner that is highly specific to the artist's hand.

**Sisters**

The counterpiece to *Glory Day* (figure 4), is *Sisters* (figure 5), a pair of large-scale, vibrantly colored, female busts placed atop brightly colored and patterned wooden pedestals. Similarly to *Glory Day* (figure 4) this pair of oversized busts utilize ovaloid and spherical volumes to relay the neck, head, and hair of the figure, while employing the flat geometric shapes of triangle and semi-circle to convey nose and ears. Seen as a pair and referencing sisterhood as their title suggests, together they invite comparison of similarities and differences
notable as the viewer experiences them. Like sisters, the two busts are similar in scale and features, though there are obvious proportional differences between the pair that speak to their individual identities. Most notable of their differences is that one of the figures is painted with a high intensity, flat, yellow enamel paint, while the other is patterned with blue polka dots on a white, traditionally glazed surface. In this case the enamel paint playfully mimics a glossy glazed surface and the glazed surface mimics traditional painterly qualities of looser paint application and visible transparencies. Within this use of high intensity color, patterning, and contrasting surface treatment, these works are vibrant and highly visible. In contrast to the awkward color matching and context of the bust in *Glory Day* (figure 4), *Sisters* (figure 5) presents vibrancy of personality through bold use of color and pattern, celebrating their unique identities through contrast of surface treatment. Standing at six feet tall they look eye to eye with the average viewer, providing a larger than life female figure whose pedestal is quite literally dressed up. The highly expressive, visually bold, and playful application of color references Niki de Saint Phalle’s *Nanas* series.9 Similar to de Saint Phalle’s, my own practice is rooted in embedding difficult personal narratives into artworks that are bright, bold, joyful, and playful all the while celebratory of women.
CHAPTER FOUR

MONUMENTALIZING THE DOMESTIC

The final work I will be talking about today is my piece titled *Tangle (figure 6)* which focuses on the theme of the societal weight of tradition.

As a little girl, my sister and I would collect beads and string them together with found threads, wire, or fishing line to make necklaces. My mom enjoyed this craft as well, producing tatted jewelry and collecting miscellaneous beads of various materials to include in her wearable creations. My sister and I were educated in girl-hood play as the visual language of body-scaled, wearable artwork. Woven into this visual language of adornment was the expectation of us as young women to be interested in beautifying ourselves with beads, colorful fibers, and braided threads.

**Tangle**

*Tangle (figure 6)* consists of three ceramic beaded ropes ending in steel clasps and presented in the forms of a tangle, a reference to the manner in which someone might pull a handful of objects from a knickknack drawer. This work presents a childish whimsy shown through flat or patterned color application and seemingly unfinished bead forms that are only partially painted with obviously poor craftsmanship. Attached to the wall at two points, two necklaces gesturally fall to the floor where they are entangled in a third necklace. The beads vary greatly in shape and color ranging from extruded and spray painted forms to glazed thrown and altered hollow forms. With lengths of the necklaces ranging from fifteen to forty feet, these
necklaces monumentalize the object often used for female adornment, making it so large that it can not be easily lifted, let alone worn.

*Tangle (figure 6)* presents an object of adornment traditionally associated with women and revisits this form at a significantly larger scale. At the end of each of these beaded strands is a black oxidized steel clasp with sharp points referencing a meat hook. The juxtaposition of the bright array of colors and diverse surface treatments visible on the beads, with the black, heavy, and sharp finish of the clasp points, conceptually relates to a societal experience of femininity that is common for women. Presented as an intertwined and entangled form of beads and rope, this work conveys the confusing and often uncertain feeling around the female identity in our current cultural and political climate. *Tangle (figure 6)* emphasizes the weight of traditional gender expectations through the literal weight and scale of this artwork as evidenced by the raw clay of the beads and thick and dense rope supporting it. Following this metaphor, the heavy, sharp clasp of each girlish necklace speaks to the inherent difficulties women face from girlhood as visually experienced through color palette to womanhood as visually present through scale. The raw physicality and monumental nature of this work while similarly holding a graceful position relates to the expectation of women to remain outwardly graceful and poised regardless of their emotional and psychological state of being.
As I conclude my discussion of these artworks, I want to point again to the heavily stylized, lyrical line that is present physically through the gravity-informed gesture of works like Bloodline (figure 1) and Tangle (figure 6), or visibly present through the stenciled layers of paintings in Dress the Table (figure 3), sculpted profiles of Sisters (figure 5) and Glory Day (figure 4), or inferred lyrical line in TomBoy (figure 2). The graphic and stylized nature of this line both infers my signature as the artist and references the male-coded visual language of clean-lines, unembellished surfaces, perfect geometries, and rational simplicity to discuss female history and experience. Through the works presented here today I have considered how my artistic voice is active in the conversation surrounding the themes of weaving as a metaphor for women’s history, the seriousness of play, monuments to the domestic, and the societal weight of tradition. As I continue forward in my art practice I intend to keep leaning into the tension between my matriarchal Craft heritage and the traditional values interwoven with that history. Moreover, when viewing this work I trust that the optimism I have for women’s future and hope I have for cultural growth in empathy and understanding is the reading that resonates with the viewer.
Figure 1: *Bloodline Weaving*, Glory Day Loflin 2022, wood, steel, and paint
50” x 150” x 72”
Figure 2: *TomBoy Weaving*, Glory Day Loflin 2022, paint on cut and assembled wood  
72” x 144”
Figure 3: *Dress the Table*, Glory Day Loflin 2023,
paint on birch panel, lumber and sawhorse brackets
Dimensions Variable (15 Modular Panels at 36” x 72”)


Figure 4: *Glory Day*, Glory Day Loflin 2023, ceramic, glaze, oil and acrylic paint, plywood, castors 36” x 36” x 70”
Figure 5: *Sisters*, Glory Day Loflin 2023, ceramic, glaze, oil and acrylic paint, plywood
Two at 30” x 30” x 70”
Figure 6: *Tangle*, Glory Day Loflin 2023, ceramic, glaze, oil and acrylic paint, spray paint, rope, forged steel
Dimensions Variable (96” x 120” x 72”)


