Prickled Lilly Perch

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A Thesis
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
Jillian Ludwig
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ABSTRACT

The Prickled Lilly Perch series consist of graphite drawings and designed wallpaper, functioning as a device to mediate and reflect on morality. This work illustrates and investigates the cyclical system of birth, life, and death through multivalent, polar conditions. These opposing implications of birth, life, and death are investigated through concept and form, and can be seen through the visual language of whimsy, fantasy, subtle narration, symbols, decoration, and delicate detailing. Operational tools to suggest birth, life, and death are described through transitioning forms, an implied direction upon the human form, aging of a plant, portals, an irrational use of gravity, and the creation of a cyclical system using plants and figures.
DEDICATION

For my parents, and their endless support and loving faith in me
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I. INDUCTION

“Within the cycles of existence, we should experience ourselves as elements of greater unity.” Bill Viola

The Prickled Lilly Perch series illustrates and studies the cyclical system of birth, life, and death. These graphite drawings imply a sense of human unity within the cycles of existence and investigate birth, life, and death through multivalent, polar conditions. My work explores the extremes of the human condition through symbols and structures that allow viewers to confront their own mortality with relative ease and a sense of grace. Questions like - Who am I? Why am I here? - are a result of my awareness of a physical beginning and end. My work poses no answers to these issues, but functions as a device to meditate and reflect on mortality and the cycle of existence.

This thesis expounds on the concept of birth, life, and death through its relation to human unity, multivalent, polar conditions, and trans-historical lineage within artistic representation. In addition it aims to identify the operational tools describing birth, life, and death and the ironic, opposing implications seen through the visual language of fantasy, subtle narration, symbols, decoration and delicate detailing.
II. CONCEPTS – BIRTH, LIFE, AND DEATH

In spite of different backgrounds, beliefs, and economic well being, the human race shares a single condition, a physical beginning and end. This broadly accessible topic of birth and death reveals the unity between all humans. Exploring unity and connecting with fellow humans is important to me as an artist. I desire to communicate with viewers in a way that words are not equipped to do, in hopes of creating a connection. I generate a sense of human unity within each individual drawing by illustrating the broadly accessible and shared human condition of birth, life, and death. In addition, I manifest this sense of unity spatially by applying wallpaper in a confined area, unifying the space and the viewers within it. The harmonized space and individual drawings create a place used for quiet reflection, an aesthetic and context which can be similarly seen in chapels and cathedrals.

Informing my interest and aesthetics in birth, life, and death are my studies and background in Catholicism. In my Catholic experiences I have felt that my understanding of life’s purpose was linked with the corporeal, specifically physical birth and death. Being Catholic, I believe that the birthing and dead body sits on the razor’s edge of another realm of existence. The drawings in this series investigate this realm of physical human transitions.
Aesthetically, I am attracted to the adornment and solemn experience of Catholic art when describing Jesus’ body. This Catholic aesthetic is further discussed when describing the use of decoration within this series.

I understand the truthful conditions of existence to be overwhelmed with great polarities – a balanced and harmonized equation of oppositions. This series illustrates and unifies the multivalent and contrasting conditions of birth and death through concept and form. Conceptually, the work explores birth, life, and death as simultaneously innocent and violent, beautiful, and ugly. I understand birth to be physically violent and painful, yet contrarily it gives way to an innocent and precious human. I use this set of strategic beliefs when creating each individual drawing. For example, *Southernwood Pleasures* is a simple drawing exploring birth and death through innocence, violence, beauty, and ugliness. It does this through the drawn depiction of a single baby drawn slumping over and inflicted with a tumor. The tumor is then repeated outside of the body, operating as flowers. Each object is drawn to contradict and absurdly offset the other, with the means to examine the multivalent nature of our existence. The baby signifies innocence and new birth, the tumor attached to the baby signifies death within new life. This seemingly ugly and undesirable tumor is then repeated, forming beautiful flowers. Another example displaying a
dialectic relationship within birth, life, and death is the *Mandala, Rose Perpetual* (2.1). Within this structurally simple but conceptually complex image, a deformed baby with two heads is rendered repeatedly, creating a whole circle. A circle suggests symmetry, perfection and overall beauty. Yet ironically, this shape was created out of the repetition of a dead, malformed, and seemingly not idealized new born, resulting in the harmonization and cohesion of the polar conditions of beauty and ugliness, violence and innocence.

2.1 *Mandala, Rose Perpetual*
This series also suggests the polar condition of birth, life, and death through its formal delivery. Topics such as birth and death in our culture are traditionally emotionally and psychologically overwhelming. I chose to construct work which did not echo this mentality, but instead visually describes an expression of simple beauty, delicacy, play, and ease.

Because all humans experience birth, life, and death, studying these experiences is just as relevant now as it was hundreds of years ago. This trans-historical subject has been represented by many art forms, including Karma cycles seen within Buddhist Mandalas, early 15th century Baroque Cathedral perspective ceilings (di sotto in sù – from below upwards), 17th century Vanitas Dutch Still-Life paintings containing specific symbols of life and death, Gustav Klimt’s 1908 “Death and Life” painting, as well Bill Viola’s contemporary videos.
III. OPERATION OF WORK – VISUALLY IDENTIFY CONCEPT

The first drawings within this body of work are identified by a simplified composition and dense application of graphite. These initial drawings use specific strategies to describe the experiences of birth, life, and death. Such operational tools consist of transitioning of forms (converting a menacing tumor into a flower form), an implied direction upon the human form (ascension or descent), and through the aging of a plant. For example, in *Malignant Buttons*, a baby hosting a tumor ascends at the top of the page. This tumor is then drawn repeatedly outside of the figure in a strict pattern. This once menacing death form now operates as a budding flower.

Within more recent drawings, the audience can identify birth, life, and death through the use of portals, the creation of a cyclical system using plants and figures, and an irrational use of gravity to describe birth, life, and death. Portals operate by implying another realm of existence, a transitional place after death. I associate this concept with the Baroque cathedral ceiling domes, in which the artist expands the perspective of the architecture into a heavenly environment. One example of this technique is Da Cortona’s *Triumph of the Barberini* ceiling fresco. *Virginity Cowslip Upward* is a sculptural piece in my work which uses portals to suggest another realm of existence after death. A mirror
lying on the floor reflects the backside of a drawing. The reflected image consists of humans falling. The mirror then operates to imply another realm of existence residing below the gallery floor.

3.1 Lucerne, Tulip to Bradley

In addition, some bodies in my recent drawings are configured in an unexpected way, proposing a directional path associated with birth and death. I
use upside down, floating, or gravity-defying figures that ascend, to suggest life after death or rebirth. I employ lying down figures and withering plants to imply death. For example, in *Lucerne and Tulip to Bradley* (3.1), the top boarder of the drawing consists of two figures lying comfortably upside down. They operate as a rebirthing body or life after death. The three figures on the bottom of the page are lying limp, signifying death. Separating these two experiences is a beautiful leaf border. Inside is a living body, signified by its implied movement. This portal suggests life. The visual representation of upside down, gravity-defying figures representing death can be seen throughout art history. An early example was made on the southern coast of Peru in the first century A.D. An embroidered funerary textile was used to wrap the dead in multiple layers. Depicted on cloth is a shaman figure flying or descending in a strict repeated pattern.
IV. VISUAL LANGUAGE

The polar opposite implications of birth, life, and death are seen through visual language of fantasy, subtle narration, symbols, decoration, and delicate detailing.

In our Western culture the topic of death and birth is often avoided, due to its psychological and emotional impact. In response to this circumstance, I chose a visual language of whimsy and fantasy to contradict and undercut the psychological and emotional content. This allows viewers to confront their mortality with relative ease. To achieve this, I made my drawings to be small in scale with an achromatic palette - creating intimacy. Also, I preserved large amounts of white space, allowing visual breathing room, simplifying form and structure. I did not want to overwhelm the viewer with large scale and loud colors. I want the experience of my work to be quiet and intimate, eliminating any sense of threat.

The contemporary painter Amy Cutler uses certain structural elements and compositions which heighten a sense of fantasy. My works, like Cutlers, use the lack of background structure to imply whimsy. Art Historian Norman Bryson in *Vitamin D*, speaks about the background of a drawing as one in reserve functioning as a device to keep at bay the desire for obvious structure,
composition and totality. By eliminating a definite background and context, I hope to not only create visual breathing room, but also suggest a sense of fantasy and play around the drawn objects and figures.

4.1 *Foxglove System*

Adding to the fantasy of the series, I actively used my imagination when constructing each drawing. Inconsistent, playful scaling, as well as odd
configurations pushes the sense of whimsy within each piece. For example, in *Cyclical System of Birth and Death*, a figure ascends upward due to an enormous balloon-like flower. This odd scaling between figure and flower is magnified even further in *Foxglove’s System* (4.1). Consisting of a life-size foxglove flanked by two ascending figures, this drawing contains figures which are about the size of one foxglove petal. To harmonize and make sense of these odd sizes, I used the dead petals which have fallen from the flower as a helicopter rotary device, actively lifting the figures.

Subtle narration plays an important part in emphasizing fantasy and whimsy within the concept of polarity within mortality. Some drawings suggest a sense of passing time within the cycle of birth, life, and death. This notion of time passing is linked with narration and storytelling. I associate my drawings specifically with children’s books. Some formal decisions visually link my drawings with certain children’s books, such as graphic, clear, descriptions of subjects, white background, emphasizing ideas through simplifying form, and careful, sweetly crafted modeling.

The *Prickled Lilly Perch* series visually and conceptually marries the seemingly contradictory elements of play, fantasy, and innocence with morbidity, a formula which can be found in specific children’s books. Maurice
Sendak, the illustrator of *Outside Over There* creates images which combine innocence and violence. Drawn so softly and carefully, a baby is captured by a pack of hooded goblins and Ida, the main character falls backwards out of a window into a world of menacing enchantment” (Kushner, 24). The innocence of the characters as well as the sweetness and care put into each of Sendak’s creepy/frightening illustrations leaves the readers with an ironically disturbing aftertaste, effects which I associate with the *Prickled Lilly Perch Series*. This quirky combination of innocence and morbidity is also present in Edward Gorey’s books. While teaching children the alphabet, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* illustrates and verbally describes the death of each child, representing a letter of the alphabet. “A is for Amy who fell down the stairs, B is for Basil assaulted by bears.” I also find similarities with the Victorian illustrators Edward Leary’s and his *Nonsense Botanical* drawings. These illustrations are highly imaginative and fantasy-like, combining flowers with random objects.

Along with narration, the *Prickled Lilly Perch* contains three drawings, which include symbols I created, *Mandala, Rose Perpetual* (2.1), *Ova-cles*, and *Freud’s Death Organ*. The *Mandala, Rose Perpetual* was earlier used as an example visually describing great polarities. The reference to this piece was taken from a medical documentation of dead Siamese twins, which was then created into a
perfect circle or Mandala. The Buddhist Mandala can be used as spiritual teaching tool or meditation and trance induction. By meditating on a child with deformities, its body repeated and composed in a symmetrically-whole, beautiful circle I encourage reflection on inevitable physical death and the pains of birth and life.

4.2 Freud’s Death Organ
The second example of a symbol within this series is *Ova-cles*. This symbol is a delicately detailed drawing, which consists of a combined image of ovaries and testicles attached by a long shaft ending at a menacing point. This edge points toward the intersection of where Siamese twins are joined. Framed and ironically juxtaposed with Rococo inspired marginalia, reflecting an art period exuding joy, play and eroticism, this symbol reflects the pains and violence of birth.

The last symbol evolved after I read a letter written by Sigmund Freud to Albert Einstein entitled *Why War* (4.2). Within this letter, Freud describes a metaphorical death organ, an intuition which would know, understand, and desire death. In my drawing, I extracted this imaginary organ from the body and surrounded it with dandelions, which are then spreading seeds upon it, implying both death and birth.

To enhance the visual logic of life and death, I use the culturally symbolic dimensions of flowers. Flowers are associated with conventional beauty, honor, funerals, dying, fertility, medicine, fleeting life, reverence and love. I chose the foxglove as a flower to symbolize birth, life, and death because on its singular long stem there are elements of budding and withering.
Decoration in this series teeters on the edge of describing conventional Western beauty and solemn or sentimental reverence. My hope is that the combination of superficial beauty and meaningful, revered beauty would further express a dialectic language in illustrating birth, life, and death.

I think of Western decorative conventions as frivolously beautiful, created without purveyors of meaning. Such ornamentation can be seen in the selection of wallpaper in contemporary homes. I echo part of this excessive, superficial decoration through creating my own wallpaper. The majority of the wallpaper is beautiful ornamentation with little hints of birth and death through inverted and reclined figures. In addition, I express superficial decoration through creating patterned and fashionable clothing on certain figures.

Decoration is simultaneously used to suggest beauty within solemn, sentimental, spiritual reverence, an aesthetic used in Catholic art. Michelangelo’s Pieta is surrounded by gorgeous Earth toned marble and uses decoration through flowing drapery. Along with the pristinely crafted material, this sculpture’s beauty invokes a notion of adoration, honor, and quiet reflection upon the somber representation of Jesus’ dead body. This aesthetic is similarly used in my work to further elicit meditation upon mortality and love and honor upon the notion of physical death.
Delicate detailing furthers the sense of adornment in the series as does the prayer-like, timely process given to each drawing. Beautiful detailing elaborates on decoration and furthers the sense of adornment and honor. Each drawing was carefully and slowly crafted, taking much time in the construction and application. I correlate the process of each drawing to be one of prayer and meditation, an act given to the illustration and studied topic of birth, life, and death.
V. CONCLUSION

The drawings and constructed wallpaper illustrates and studies birth, life, and death and does so through harmonizing my subjective understanding of the polar, multivalent conditions of existence. The dialectic investigation can be seen through concept and form, using a visual language of fantasy, subtle narration, symbols, decoration and delicate detailing. Creating a series which appears whimsical, delicate, and overall beautiful, I generated a space of individual drawings functioning as a place for meditation upon human mortality and the inevitable cycle of life.
REFERENCES


