12-2013

The Process of Passage

David Gerhard
Clemson University, david.s.gerhard@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses
Part of the Fine Arts Commons

Recommended Citation
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/1773

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.
THE PROCESS OF PASSAGE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
David Sidney Gerhard
December 2013

Accepted by:
Sydney Cross, Committee Chair
Andrea Feeser
Todd McDonald
ABSTRACT

My art navigates the fragmented religious traditions of my childhood in an attempt to clarify my thoughts and feelings about which spiritual beliefs and practices I want to teach my children. This navigation is represented across art media through portraits of my family and myself. As I was raised in a multicultural family that combined aspects of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism, a complex navigation occurs within me to find meaning in existence amidst disparate traditions, cultures, and beliefs. For my thesis show, I adapted existing fragments and frameworks from these varied beliefs and cultural traditions into a collage of a belief system.

Similar to combining belief systems in my spiritual practice, my studio practice combines art processes. Through my use of contemporary printmaking and time-based media I combine components of drawing, traditional printmaking, photography, sculpture, and digital media. My art also combines types of visualization, technology, and process. The way I see the world today from multiple viewpoints is presented through this hybrid art making process.
DEDICATION

I dedicate my research and art to my entire family for an endless supply of love and support. My wife Whitney Boggs Gerhard is an amazing friend who has done everything in her power to ensure that life is beautiful. My son Isaac Elliott Gerhard only has to live and breathe to provide endless inspiration. All of this is for you.
I am extremely grateful to the Art Department faculty and students for the hours of constructive criticism, teaching, and support. I especially want to thank my thesis committee, Sydney Cross, Andrea Feeser, and Todd Mcdonald for all they have given me. Through them I have broadened my understanding of printmaking, painting, and contemporary art. Your patience, honesty, and understanding has been integral to my visual and written creative work. Thank you for standing by me over the past two and a half years.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE .................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT .............................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION .........................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...............................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES ..................................................................</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................ | 1 |
II. FRAGMENTATION .................................................................... | 3 |
III. NAVIGATION ......................................................................... | 6 |
IV. CLARITY ............................................................................... | 9 |
V. CONCLUSION ........................................................................... | 12 |

FIGURES .................................................................................. | 13 |

BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................................................... | 27 |
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><em>Mother and Child</em></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td><em>My father paused from writing</em></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>First half of <em>Being There</em> Exhibition</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><em>Winter</em></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td><em>fragment / whole</em></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td><em>My digitally mediated interaction with Anish Kapoor’s Untitled concave dish</em></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7a.</td>
<td><em>Pregnancy (first in a series of eight)</em></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b.</td>
<td><em>Pregnancy (fifth in a series of eight)</em></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td><em>Who Cares for the Weeds?</em></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td><em>Hey :) where r u?</em></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td><em>Swing</em></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td><em>Duality</em></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td><em>Love</em></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td><em>First Breath and Buddhabrot</em></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td><em>Dandelion Observation</em></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td><em>from my body, of my son</em></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

My art navigates the fragmented religious traditions of my childhood in an attempt to clarify my thoughts and feelings about which spiritual beliefs and practices I want to teach my children. This navigation is represented across art media through portraits of my family and myself. As I was raised in a multicultural family that combined aspects of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism, a complex navigation occurs within me to find meaning in existence amidst disparate traditions, cultures, and beliefs. For my thesis show, I adapted existing fragments and frameworks from these varied beliefs and cultural traditions into a collage of a belief system.

Similar to combining belief systems in my spiritual practice, my studio practice combines art processes. Through my use of contemporary printmaking and time-based media I combine components of drawing, traditional printmaking, photography, sculpture, and digital media. My art also combines types of visualization, technology, and process. The way I see the world today from multiple viewpoints is presented through this hybrid art making process. In the process of representing my ideas, they are transformed into something new. This is evident in many of my works where I begin with one medium, often digital, and shift to translate it in to another, often drawing or printmaking. This re-interpretation parallels my spiritual journey, where disparate parts attempt to come together as a whole. When these disparate parts are combined, sometimes the new outcomes are confusing or nonsensical, which require me to make meaning out of the chaos. The resulting artworks present moments of confusion or clarity.
from my spiritual navigation. This is visualized through fragmentation, repetition, layering, and complexity. The artwork ranges from chaotic to harmonious representing my conflicting ideas, impulses, and faith about which traditions and beliefs I want to pass onto my children.

As I represent my family through portraiture, each work helps me shape my understanding of the world. Each portrait reflects my relationship to that individual as well as a world perspective. This is visually presented differently for each family member as our relationships differ. When depicting my son I tend to consider tenderness, fragility, and the passage of time. In artworks of my parents, brother, and wife, I often portray my perceptions of their lives. The subjects are focused within themselves in states of thought. The portrait of my mother (Figure 1) is layered with iconographic representations from divergent philosophical sources. The mokulito (wood lithography) portrait of my father (Figure 2) is layered yet unified to show divergent perspectives of reality from the same individual. Imagery is also repeated through fragmentation to show movement over time. The visual complexity in all of the art parallels the complexity of my shifting system of beliefs.
CHAPTER TWO
FRAGMENTATION

The thesis exhibition, *Being There* (Figure 3), was laid out in the chronological order of my journey becoming a parent. This passage is presented as you circle around the exhibition. The portraits of my parents represent my background in a mixed, philosophically fragmented environment. The series of my pregnant wife fades from clarity over the course of eight prints representing my mounting anxiety during that time. The exhibition includes two digital works on monitors. The left monitor represents the birth of my son, which was the catalyst for my existential and philosophical questioning. In the remaining work I navigate my disparate perceptions and beliefs, and in a few pieces clarify what I believe so that I can pass some sort of knowledge onto my children.

Fragmentation is employed in my work because of this wrestling. Before my son was born, I was all right with my multi belief system and felt connected with so much of the world. As I became a father, I realized that being of many spiritual traditions can be a confusing challenge, especially when considering which ideas I want to pass onto my children. My sense of spiritual identity and my relationship with the physical world became fragmented. This shift from feeling whole to fractured is present between my self-portraits *winter* and *fragment/whole*.

*Winter* (Figure 4) presents my view of myself before the birth of my son. It was created in response to the career I left to pursue an MFA. At the time I felt interconnected with so much of the world, but my voice was unable to get out. In my previous career I ran social media marketing campaigns all day, and my voice could not be distinguished
through the noise, but I had a voice and a sense of wholeness. The screenprint presents the world as fragmented through hard lined digital editing cuts, while my image is relatively whole. Representations of the world are inside of my head. The birds flocking around my mouth visualize the Twitter streams silencing my voice. This wholeness is not a fleeting moment, but exists as separate moments of time are presented simultaneously, as one side of my face has longer hair and a beard, while the other is shorter hair and clean-shaven. I connect with the world as the hair of my beard becomes trees, which cover my cheeks and nose. A clouded sky sits in my forehead and is covered by my hair as light emits from one eye while the other is in deep shadow. Albeit ominous, the world is within me.

*Fragment/whole* (Figure 5) was created after my son was born, and my sense of self was broken apart. My image becomes expressive marks and repeated exploding fragments of myself. My image fractures as I consider the relationship of multiples to the whole. It was created as an aesthetic response to my interaction with Anish Kapoor’s *Untitled* concave dish that “creates the uncanny sense of limitlessness through the myriad fractured reflections of the viewer in its surface” (High Museum). I found this interesting because of the fragmentation of my experiences as a new parent working two jobs while in graduate school, and someone involved with technology and social networks. My mental experience was fragmented, but physically I was whole. I chose to translate my fragmented mobile phone photo (from my interaction with Anish Kapoor’s artwork) (Figure 6) into a physically whole piece. The woodcut presents this physicality by embossing the paper as the ink saturates the page. The woodcut was printed as a
monoprint inked à la poupée to emphasize the singularity and fragility of its physical existence.

Deenesh Ghyczy is a contemporary artist who also creates fragmented portraits. Deenesh Ghyczy paints people that he knows, as they are in a contemplative state of mind. He paints from photographic sources shot through the filters of glass. My approach is similar, but I use filtered and fragmented imagery derived from digital sources. He does not paint himself, whereas I make self portraits and portraits of my loved ones. Art blogger Bart Dewijze writes, “The artist is trying to express the fact that people are estranged from themselves and unable to preserve a personal identity. In these times of ever emerging virtual identities, we often do not recognize ourselves anymore. On the surface we exist of many different parts, even different personalities and the result is fragmentation. Like the paintings, we are floating apart.” Ghyczy thinks that within we are still whole, and references the Sanskrit term for life force, Prana, which relates with the cyclical systems of the universe. Prana enters the body from the universe, through the breath and into every cell of the circulatory system. My work also shows fragmented and whole individuals. I often use circular compositions, integration of imagery, and references to religious iconography to do this. Ghyczy’s paintings are searching for answers in a similar way that my work is searching for answers about the essence of existence.
CHAPTER THREE

NAVIGATION

My experimentation with media and printmaking processes reflect my navigation of disparate beliefs. When I make varied print editions, combining different types of plates and methods, I encourage intuitive combinations in my printmaking process. In the Pregnancy series (Figure 7) visual clarity fades representing my fading conceptual clarity and mounting anxiety during my wife’s pregnancy. It starts as a screenprint with graphite handwork. A resist is added midway through the series, so that the last print has made a complete transition as it no longer is simply a representational screenprint, but is hand inked like an intaglio plate. It changes visually and materially. The experimentation and innovation in the history of printmaking provides me with a precedent for experimenting with new printmaking techniques synthesizing multiple traditions. These hybrid printmaking processes include hand-3D printed relief via silkscreen, and Mokulito wood-lithography relief printing. I combine media in a similar fluid way. Through this intuitive process, it becomes harder to characterize the art media for specific work, just as by combining beliefs I cannot easily identify myself as just one culture or another.

I combine creative processes and philosophies in Who Cares for the Weeds (Figure 8) in order to make sense of disparate traditions. I combine poetry, relief printing, and indexical marks to show my pacing meditation pondering how we treat each other. In the poem, I wrote allusions to my heritage as a child of the New Age movement where Hinduism and Buddhism have combined with Judeo-Christian tradition. The print is presented as a scroll, which I connect to the Jewish religious text the Torah. In some
ways the pacing captured in my work is a deliberation over my philosophical separation from my heritage in a line of Jews surviving the Holocaust. This print acts as an index of pacing silently for 108 minutes. Silent meditation and the number 108 is especially significant in Buddhism and Hinduism. The print presents hundreds of overlapped footprints with fragments of the poem. To make the print I created a hand 3D-printed relief matrix on the soles of my brother’s shoes. Some of the content of the poem is visible in each step, but often it is chaotic and must be pieced together from observing multiple steps. The message of the poem is indicative of the beliefs I want to pass onto my children: to be aware of how you interact and care for others, and to have a sense of self-sufficiency versus being walked all over. The chaotic aesthetic of the print presents my conflicting impulse to choose one religious tradition over another.

*Who Cares for the Weeds* was inspired by the work of Lesley Dill. She gives form to language and explores the boundaries between mind, body, and spirit. She is able to bounce between cultures ranging from Indian Buddhism to the Emmanuel Baptist church where “she instinctively tied into the profound strain of mysticism in African American religious practice” (Shaw-Eagle). *Poem Eyes #3* particularly connects with my work as she uses poetic text and alternative processes to explore spirituality.

I continue to use the alternative print techniques in *Hey :) where r u?* (Figure 9) where I explore the act of searching for meaning. Sometimes during the search for knowledge, we lose sight of ourselves. In the lithograph, my wife appears fairly androgynous and deep in thought to visualize this loss of self and create a visual entry point for the viewer. While in thought she becomes lost in the world as clouds,
architecture, and power lines intersect with her face. The loose meandering lines and rendered drawing become a record for my navigation of making sense of the world through observation. In Buddhism, there is an emphasis on being here, aware of this moment. I include this in the visual dialogue by layering a Buddhist mandala atop the lithograph. A mandala is an Eastern geometric design symbolizing a sacred space in the universe. Deities have been removed from it leaving adornment, concentric circles and an added maze in the center of the mandala. At the center of the maze and the composition is a deeply hidden text message “hey :) where r u?” Although this is in the center of it all, it takes an awareness to see it, an awareness that you don’t always have when lost in thought, reading, or engaged with the Internet. It optimistically asks the viewer after navigating a space to consider oneself. The act of looking at the work becomes a distraction from awareness of one’s own being, until the question may be found in the center of it all.
CHAPTER FOUR

CLARITY

Concentric circles are used in a number of my pieces and relate to the bindu, a symbol in the Indian yogic tradition that represents the point at which all life begins and ends. Often a dot, or seed, the bindu is the symbol of convergence used in yoga, Vedanta, and tantra. It “is a stage of Advanced Meditation in which all experiences collapse, so to speak, into a point from which all experiences arose in the first place. It is near the end of the mind itself, after which one travels beyond or transcends the mind and its contents. It is the doorway to the Absolute or Truth (by whatever name you call it). The Bindu is an actual, directly experienced reality” (Bharati). Don Cooper has uses concentric circles in his artwork to explore the bindu for over a decade. I visualize the bindu in a similar way through the use of concentric circles in many of my works including Swing (Figure 10), Duality (Figure 11), Dandelion Observation, and First Breath and Buddhabrot. This point presents convergence of beginning, end, time, experience, and is supposed to lead towards ultimate clarity.

This clarity emerges in my digital print Love (Figure 12). For me, love is the most important quality in life, which stems from all of the religious traditions of my upbringing. This is visualized by overlaying texts from religious and philosophical writings of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism. Amidst the chaotic nonsensical sentences, Love emerges as the center of a circle of red letters. This visually references red letter bibles in order to underscores the importance I give to Love. The combination of cultures presented amidst the mixed text shows that the importance Love
regardless of religious affiliation. The clarity in this piece can frame how to look at the two monitor works (*First Breath and Buddhabrot*, and *Dandelion Observation*) and the drawing from my body, of my son.

*First Breath and Buddhabrot*, and *Dandelion Observation* meditate on time, balance, and fragility. *First Breath and Buddhabrot* (Figure 13) shows a looped video of my son breathing, hours after his birth, compared with a computer code. The open source Processing computer code visualizes the Mandlebrot set fractal, called the Buddhabrot, which infinitely iterates upon itself appearing to repeat, until the iterations are smaller than a pixel when it appears to stand still. This piece is a metaphor for the beginning of life, and presents a Western and Eastern philosophical presentation of time, one linear, and one cyclical. The *Dandelion Observation* (Figure 14) triptych presents three cyclical looped videos. The center video is an observation of light through a sphere of dandelion seeds. The fragility of the dandelion seeds relates to the fragility of a baby, and can also be connected with the bindu. The two flanking videos have mediated framing to place the viewer farther away from the subject. The video on the left also observes light through the dandelion, but it appears less clear, and creates light abstractions. The mediated frame is torn away, at which point the video loops to the beginning. The video on the right uses the same mediated framing to show my home with my wife repeatedly strumming guitar cords. The torn away frame on the left relates to Bill Viola’s triptych at Nantes where a slowly floating figure is sucked out of frame. His work also engages spiritual questions, and his triptych at Nantes looks at birth, life, and death concurrently.
The portrait *from my body, of my son* (Figure 15) is almost a note from me to my son on how to live life. I draw my son’s face using my beard hair and back skin, which is only configured with gravity and not adhered permanently. Even having the protection of a glass frame on a pedestal, it is inherently fragile. As with the previous two works, a similar attention to balance and time is present, but here the materials and drawing are ephemeral. The viewer may have a visceral reaction or a sense of anxiety or fear of destruction that parallels my own concerns with mortality and being a parent. This ephemerality punctuates the fragility of every moment together. I have a limited time in my role in shaping my son’s beliefs. It is believed that childhood is more important in shaping an individual’s life than any other time in one’s development. Through his growth, my relationship with my son changes constantly, and the way I have portrayed him, as a toddler, using materials out of my current adult body, will not be accurate for very long. This piece framed in the exhibition by the meditations on love, the beginning of life, ephemerality, and fragility also ask for a certain amount of trust in the world. I have to trust that the well being of this artwork is a bit out of my hands, as I cannot be in the gallery to protect it or explain it all the time. All I can hope is that the work may begin to speak to the viewer through the associations I have presented with it. In many ways the same goes for my son. After hours of tender care, a parent eventually needs to let go.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Although these artworks are characterized by expressing fragmentation, navigation, or clarity, I believe that many of these artworks express all three characteristics and are not exclusive to their specific categories. The artworks can almost be interchangeable between sections as each artwork expresses some degree of all three qualities. My personal journey and the journey of making artwork start with disparate parts or fragments, navigate to make sense of these parts, and hope to arrive at a sense of clarity.

I have not figured out the answers to all my questions, but through this work I have been able to show my chaotic journey from a fragmented perception to having moments of clarity. Perhaps more importantly, I engage in a larger dialogue with the traditions of printmaking, and questions of existence, issues of time, and materiality of the body that other artists like Lesley Dill, Don Cooper, Bill Viola, and many others are engaging in today.
FIGURES

Figure 1: Mother and Child
Lithograph, screenprint monotype, colored pencil, gesso, charcoal, cut paper, inkwash on panel, 48” x 48”, 2013
Figure 2: My father paused from writing
Mokulito (wood lithography), 36” x 60”, 2013

Figure 3: First half of Being There Exhibition
Figure 4: Winter
Screenprint monoprint, 36” x 28”, 2011
Figure 5: fragment / whole
À la poupée woodcut, 36” x 28”, 2012
Figure 6: My digitally mediated interaction with Anish Kapoor’s Untitled concave dish
Digital image, scale variable, 2012
Figure 7a: Pregnancy (first in a series of eight)
Screenprint, graphite, 20” x 16”, 2011
Figure 7b: Pregnancy (fifth in a series of eight)
Screenprint, resist, wax, hand wiped intaglio ink, 20” x 16”, 2011
Figure 8: Who Cares for the Weeds?
Relief print, velum, shoe relief block, 108” x 36”, 2013
Figure 9: Hey :) where r u?
Stone lithography, photo wood relief, 20” x 16”, 2013
Figure 10: Swing
Graphite, colored pencil, 51” x 59”, 2013
Figure 11: Duality
Lithography crayon, tusche wash, gesso, on MDF board, 25” x 25”, 2013
In this way you will be freed
from all the results of your actions.

12 For the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.
13 Happy is the man whom God delights. It is a good thing to be despised by men and to be esteemed by your brothers.
14 For the fruit of the spirit is better than silver, and its profit is greater than gold.
15 She is more precious than jewels, and her price is far above rubies.
16 Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.
17 Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.
18 She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and those who hold her fast will be blessed.
19 The Lord by wisdom made the earth.
20 He stretched out the heavens from above, and beneath them is his everlasting name.
21 His might is in the heavens above, and his steadfast love above the earth.
22 By understanding he founded the earth, and by his wisdom he established the heavens.
23 He wrought it well; it is his doing; there is none to overthrow it.
24 If you sit down, eat with confidence, and do not fear;
25 Do not be afraid, and do not be discouraged because of the rumor of war;
26 For the Lord will be with you, and will keep the camp of the wicked away from you.
27 Do not be afraid of what they may say, or what they may plot against you.
28 Do not withhold good from your friends, or withhold from your strangers when they do you a kindness or lend you things.
29 Do not hide your kindness from your friend, the evil and the disobedient, or be jealous of your own flesh.
30 Do not say to your friend, "Go, and come again", and come again.
31 Do not say in your heart, "Who will rise up against me?" or, "Who will come after me?"
32 Do not hold your kindness back from your friend, and do not say, "I will recompense evil for evil.""
Figure 13: First Breath and Buddhabrot
2 channel video loop and algorithm visualization, scale variable, 2011

Figure 14: Dandelion Observation
Video triptych, scale variable, 2013
Figure 15: from my body, of my son
Beard hair, back skin, plexiglass, 8” x 9”, 2013
BIBLIOGRAPHY


