

“Often the hands will solve a mystery that the intellect has struggled with in vain.” (Carl Jung)

I commenced my semester with a sense of clear purpose and nicely laid out plans for my work going forward. Writing on my initial residency experience, I articulated a plausible area for exploration; “There will be a more intentional focus on the deconstruction and reconstruction of domestic objects as a way of metaphorically addressing feminist issues through the personal content coming from my own trauma and experience with domestic abuse and sexual violence. These issues will be explored through my need to reclaim the domestic space for my own and give voice to the nameless, voiceless, ‘objects’ that we use to facilitate our own personal pleasures.” This all sounds laudable, and very conceptually interesting, but it is not at all what happened. The work that evolved, though rooted in my own trauma, came from some unknown, dark part of me, that could not be articulated or conceptualized pre-facto. The actual work is closer to an artifact created through the process of a struggle with the unknown, the unseen, the un-nameable, the dangerous, the unconscious. It was not born from a nice, neat, preorganized concept; it

assimilated itself out of my own hands and body, and completely surprised the conscious me.

An initial observation of my work by Deborah Davidson, “they are trying to be objects,” did survive my art process this semester. Another view by Ben Sloat framed the overall sensibility as having an “element of threat’ or aggression, and this ethos also maintained its presence this term. In January, these themes took the form of working on found domestic objects, such as drawers and chairs, breaking them apart with a sledge hammer, reconstructing, and assembling them into an environment. I began with “ready-mades”, two pieces that I had already created, one was a drawer that had been embedded with nails and encrusted with paint. Smashed to bits, I then reassembled them and added wire, glitter, tiles and legs from a high chair. Unexpectedly, an intense experience of disgust arose in me toward the work, and increasingly I felt a real sense of despair, of being locked out of something important. The work had a dissociative aspect, as if they were more like set pieces in a play that contained no emotional vibrancy. Frustration with the rigidity and restrictive aspect of the wood infuriated me. Therefore, I moved away from the drawers and began painting on top of an old Chinese screen from my mother. The frame was

wood, but the body of the piece was fabric and could be ripped and torn; the piece began to be unclothed, laid bare. Working on both sides of the screen fed my desire for greater freedom and three dimensionality.

Everything I painted turned white, I seemed to be erasing color.

During this time I wrote my first paper, *Spirituality and the Body: Hilma af Klint and Congolese Power Figures*. The paper introduced me to the idea of cultural world views and how they both shape our conscious understanding and experience of the world, and also create unconscious obscurations and viewpoints. It was illuminating to contrast a known, European, bourgeois, white, women's spiritually based artwork (although radical for the time), with an unknown, African, object of spiritual dimensions. What was important for me to see was that Klint's work still embodied much of Western idea's of privileging the mind over the body. I was fascinated and very drawn to the raw power and the strong emotional reaction and connection that I had to the Nkisi Nkondi. The Nkisi's view of the interweaving of body and mind, and of not shying away from violence (the nails embedded in the piece), was very compelling. This concept of integration versus transcendence appealed to me; of how the assimilation of

violence into something might be beneficial if done in a ritualized way. A need to embrace the body led me to completely reject my appropriation of ready-made forms (the drawers) and led to creating something from scratch, to make my “own body”, with which I could control its shape and form to a greater degree.

Malleability, vulnerability, transformability and portability became important. For inspiration I turned to another artifact that came from my first residency, a book that I had made in Deborah Davidson’s *Book Art* class. It was light, flexible, portable, and when standing it on its end, it became a sculpture. I decided to make a giant version of it, so that it would become a type of architecture that you would be ‘inside’. I yearned to use my own body – to physically immerse myself in, and struggle with the work. Thus, working large became paramount, and created a need for and utilization of cheap, abundant, large scale, construction and throw out materials such as cardboard, metal flashing, screws, nails, hinges, zippers and tape. The idea of working mainly with paper, which is a form of ‘digested’ wood, really appealed to me. Paper can be hard and strong, but it also can be wetted and turn moldable, it can be torn, ripped, collaged, cut, gauged, stapled, bolted and nailed. In other words, the paradox of its vulnerability, its easily

molested and violated form, combined with its lightness, strength and flexibility created the perfect material.

A turning point in the semester came after writing my second paper, “The Sublime and Sublimation in the Work of Louise Bourgeois.” Upon viewing her work, I experienced an incredibly violent, emotional, reaction. Shaking and crying, I had to temporarily leave the museum and sit in my car in order to recover enough to take pictures and study them further. Due to my personal experience with prolonged psychological, sexual and physical abuse, the pieces triggered an overwhelming sensation of not only being back in that environment, but of connecting with the tremendous suffering of the artist. There was a dystopian, Orwellian feel; of someone watching you, controlling you, and making you do things you didn’t want to do; of manipulating your mind, of violation, of suffocation, of being forced to watch sexual acts, or perform sexual acts, and of imprisonment. I was amazed by this incredible reaction, and I kept saying to myself, “I never want to make art like that, I never want to make art like that.” At the time, it was just too painful for me. However, upon reflection I realized that I had never before experienced such strong emotions while

viewing art. I began to wonder if I might want to make work that was this powerful, even if it was disturbing or difficult.

As long as I can remember, I have preferred to look at work that was 'beautiful', or that made you feel some sort of joy or happiness. I believe now, that it was more a sense of aesthetic pleasure or satisfaction that I had been trained to experience and label as 'beautiful'. There was not a really strong embodied, emotional experience. Fascination with the power of Bourgeois' work dovetailed nicely with my psychotherapy at the time, which was to try to really be aware of my emotions and to look at my own fears and 'shadow' aspects of myself. Furthermore, some of these darker impulses had started to manifest earlier in my work (Ben Sloat had seen that there was a strong element of aggression in my pieces, sometimes covered over with 'pretty' colors, which he termed "aggressively friendly.") What was revelatory to me about Louise's work was that she was not making art for the viewer. Her artwork was an artifact of a psychological process of wrestling with her own internal psyche. She gave me permission to make artwork for my own benefit. I never thought about that possibility. Focusing on the viewer's experience was how I had been trained, how I had been trained to live my whole life. Looking at scary or difficult things

was not something 'done' in my family, it was to be avoided at all costs.

The concept that I could make artwork that was difficult, and that the very act of looking and creating could be liberating was an epiphany.

The outside of my 'book' was still being worked on. My mentor, Patte Loper, called it my "big ass book." Which I rather liked. However, the piece started to morph into something more like a screen, or a piece of architecture, or a house, or container. Another person called it a 'tardis', which is rather appropriate as it does have an element of time travel.

Outside was heavily worked with many layers of paper, cardboard, tape, nails, screws, metal flashing, scrapes, power sanding marks, and tears. I had not yet started the interior of the piece. At this time, I wrote my third paper on Howardena Pindell. The concept that most resonated with me from her work was that of bringing the figure back; embedding the body into the work, but also embedding meaning into the work. In my own piece, forms started emerging in the exterior panels. I also began embedding objects that had meaning, or a type of talismanic property. Physical interaction with the work became more important and a desire to really wrestle with the piece; to use my body to fight something, but also to incorporate with it, to create a relationship through the interaction. The

manifestation or artifact of my body's limitation, vulnerability and ability shaped the piece's form. We fought, it often fell on me, scratched me, or refused to do what I wanted. It was very sharp and had multiple spikey surfaces. There was a definite fear of being hurt by the piece, and I made extra effort to be careful not to injure myself. In the end I won; I established an equilibrium with the piece, and it began to be less violent and threatening. There was a big release of energy at this stage and I felt able to begin work on the inside.

The initial idea for the inside of the book was that I wanted a refuge, a beautiful space to rest and perhaps congregate with others. I had thought that the outside was the more difficult space and one would need relief on the inside. However, as seems to be the pattern with this semester, the opposite transpired. The inside is actually where I feel the most uncomfortable and have trouble staying in it for long periods. I feel shy about this area, as it feels so intimate, embarrassing and rather disturbing. I made a decision to work with material that had a strong emotional charge and that I found difficult to look at, let alone touch. I took my abuser's jacket, embedding it in the cardboard wall with tape. An overwhelming desire to cut up the jacket, to open it up, to have nothing hidden overcame

me. I opened every seam and turned it inside out. The tape started to eat the jacket, and then these forms or parts of bodies started to emerge. At this time I was reading the book "Pigs Eat Wolves" by Charles Bates. The book explains the Jungian idea of needing to explore your shadow side, your wolf side, and integrating it. The concept is that you tend to project out in the world your shadow side and that disempowers you, so you get eaten. That is what I see happening on the inside of the piece, I am the pig/tape – it's rather like a pig's skin. The cloth is my abuser, or all the sides of me that terrify me, that I see as dark, scary and disgusting. This piece is the manifestation of the pig eating the wolf. Integrating it into myself.

Louise Bourgeois had a piece called *Destruction of the Father*. She eats her father and reconstitutes it inside of herself. This is a similar idea. I had not seen any of this in my piece until I read the book, now it seems very clear to me. My mentor said that the work had gone through three stages; first a book, then a house, then a body – where the jacket, the shadow, the wolf, gets eaten and digested.